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THE BROKEN SPUR
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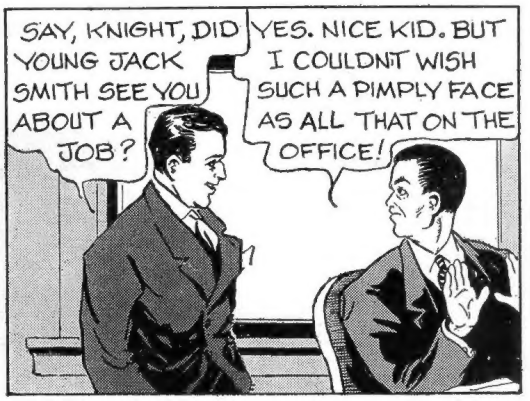

—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

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PIMPLES are often a real drawback during the years following the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25, or even longer.

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. IX, No. 2 G. B. FARNUM, *Editor* May, 1936

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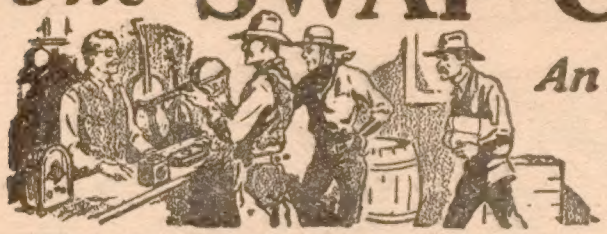

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I've got a Stevens Pump, 12 G.A.; Zither harp, Waltham watch; four bass accordian; 12 G.A. single Bl., and would like to get a large accordian or something of value. Francis Dapore, Versailles, Ohio.

What can you offer in exchange for a radio ore locator; all-wave portable radio; or a magic set and information on magic? Would prefer to get bicycle. Your list brings mine. William Murr, Neubert, Tenn.

Here's a good chance to get a complete guitar course in exchange for photos of cowboys and rodeos or back copies of periodicals. Alfred Dionne, Riviere Trois-Pistoles, Co. Temiscouata, Quebec, Canada.

Step up to the Swap Counter to get twenty Van Heusen collars (soft, size 13½), still in original waxpaper bags. Send stationary, envelopes in exchange. Joseph Santner, 1500 Lexington Avenue, N. Y. C.

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Here's a good micro set 2mx; 5,000 stamps; hunting knife; crystal radio and old coins waiting to be swapped for ukelele, mandolin, guitar, etc. Write to me first. Arthur Weinberg, 701 Magnolia Avenue, Sanford, Florida.

Tell me what you'll offer for my tenor-banjo, 12-inch resonator or racing tube ice skates (size 10½). Would like barbells, typewriter, etc. Clifford Ferris, Tyrus Street, East Hempstead, N. Y.

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Send me Asian, African, French Colonial stamps, will give equal catalogue any other kind wanted. Send now to J. W. Stotlemeyer, R. F. D., No. 1, Wilkinsburg, Pa.

Do you want old books or periodicals; Edison phonograph (1900 model); Confederate money, or many other valuable articles? I'll send you any of these things if you swap cowboy outfits for many of them. D. F. Deuel, Derby, New York.

Can you send me Indian relics of any kind; curios; a typewriter? I'd be willing to send you any kind of periodicals; books; tobacco-bag caps; golf clubs or slot machines if you send me what I want. M. Foster, Paris, Arkansas.

If you'd like to get a Packard fountain pen and pencil combination, or a baseball pitching course, send me an Eastman camera, or something of value. Joe A. Froeber, Route No. 3, Box No. 62, Harvey, N. Dakota.

Would you swap your typewriter; mimeograph machine; printing press or small safe or duplicator for a choice grey, black or white raccoon? A. A. Verbsky, Euclid Avenue, Euclid, Ohio.

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Would like course in Fur Craft: live game birds or other animals: guitar or jigsaw puzzles. Can send you 30X Brownscope and seven-book course on Taxidermy, worth twenty-five dollars. David Bazyk, P. O. Box No. 93, Granby, Conn.

For every view card that you send me, I'll send you five cents' worth of all different foreign stamps. Ernest Krietsch, 1010 East 17th Street, Port Arthur, Texas.

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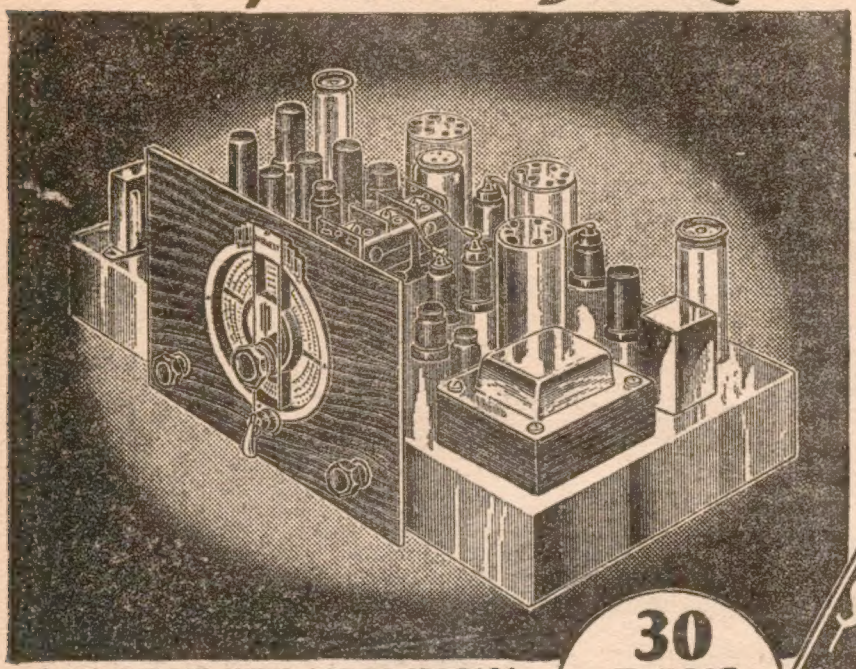

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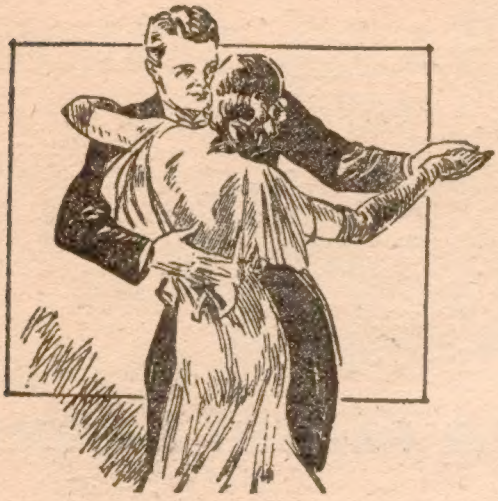

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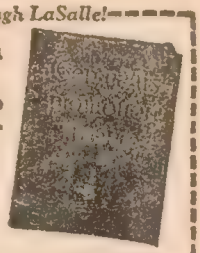

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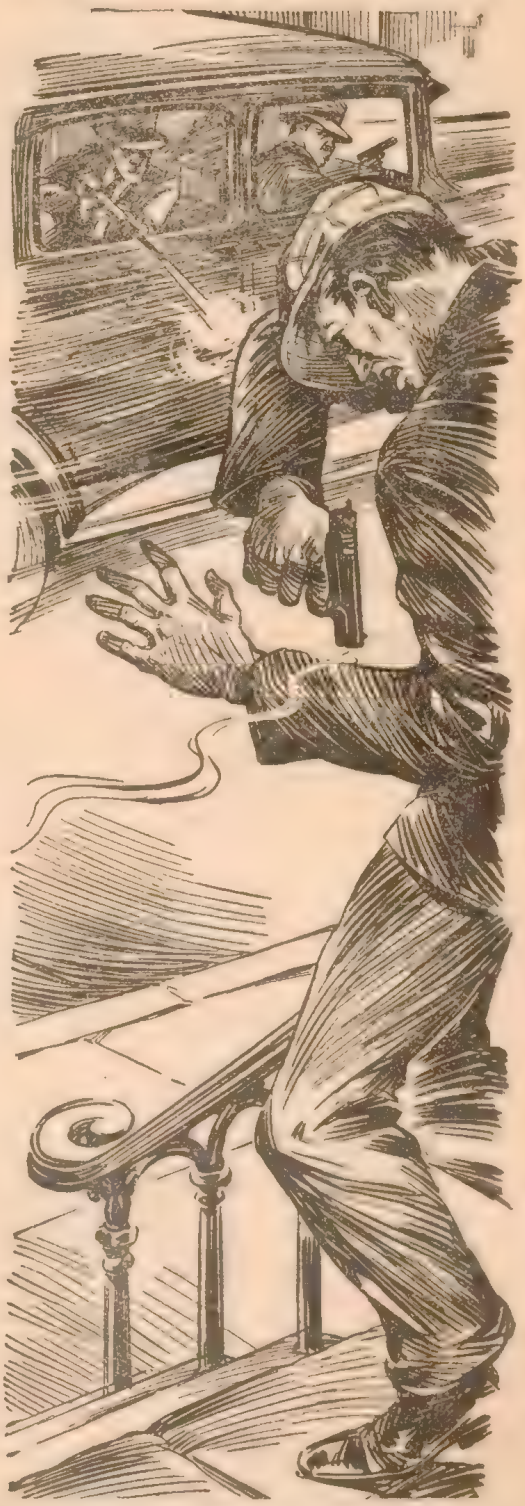

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Jim's Roaring Six-Guns Speak their Piece

By A. LESLIE

Author of "The Trail Herd," "The Arizona Ranger," etc.

Duane seized the girl and hurled her

Duane *of* Rocky

CHAPTER I

Out of the Night

NIGHT! With the golden stars of Nevada hanging in clusters above the mountain tops. The blue-black bowl of the sky was brimful of the moon's white fire, which a wailing wind stirred 'round and 'round until it spilled over the edges and poured a silver torrent down upon the world.

The howl of a coyote drifted from a low ledge and simmered about in the purple sage as if a score of the beasts were plainting. Somewhere a night bird called with monotonous grief. The wind crooned to itself as it walked its blue way over the prairie. A dim trail wound across the path of the wind.

A dot, black against the grey of the trail, dipped and bounded and jolted, growing larger minute by minute. It swayed and careened to the accompaniment of a musical jingle and a rhythmic thud. Now and then a sharp whip-crack punctuated the

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from him with all his strength

Ridge

level pulse of thud and jingle. Faint and thin with distance sounded an occasional shout:

"Hi-yi! G-long!"

Swiftly the dot grew, until it resolved into a rolling, rocking, thundering stage coach drawn by six splendid horses. Down the trail it swept, swinging and swaying, the weird music of the driver's bugle awakening the echoes and setting the coyotes to yipping livelier than ever.

In the shadow of a turret of stone that flanked the trail something

of a New Gold Strike!

moved. There was a sliding click as of steel slithering over a rough surface. Three horsemen rode out of the shadow and loomed gigantic in the path of the approaching stage.

"Hold!"

The voice was peremptory, challenging. It jerked the driver upright on his high box and tightened his grip on the reins. For an instant it seemed he was going to pull up; then he yelled at the horses and the stage roared forward.

Crash!

A long lance of flame gushed through the night. It seemed to center on the breast of the driver. As the echoes of the shot tossed and yammered among the ridges, the driver slumped down on the boot. The horses reared and stumbled, slugged against one another and came to a plunging halt. The three mounted men rode forward.

"Outside, you in theah!" one of them shouted.

A MAN came out of the stage. Came out shooting with both hands. There was a yell of consternation from the horsemen, then a regular explosion of six-shooters.

Tall, lithe, bronzed of face and grey of eye, the man from the stage crouched low, weaving deceptively from side to side. A bullet swept his wide hat from his head. Another flickered through his thick black hair, leaving a red smear in its passing. A third ripped the sleeve of his blue shirt. The man who fired it went out of the saddle in a plunging dive.

Another of the mounted men yelled shrilly, dropping his gun and clutched at a blood-spouting shoulder. The remaining dry-gulcher threw down with deadly aim.

Before he could pull trigger the Colt in the tall man's left hand blazed flame and smoke. A look of vast astonishment spread over the mounted man's face. Limp as a bundle of old clothes, he slid from the back of his plunging horse. A voice shouted inside the stage: "Look out, feller, heah comes more of 'em!"

The grey-eyed man, smoking guns tense and ready glanced over his shoulder. His lean jaw tightened.

Six—eight—ten ghostly forms were sweeping down upon the stage from the crest of a low hill. Flame licked and flickered from their midst. The crack of the guns followed the drone of bullets.

With the speed of his own stabbing guns, the grey-eyed man acted. He slammed the smoking sixes into the holsters that sagged low on his muscular thighs and swung himself onto

the driver's box. Slim, sinewy hands gathered the dangling reins, a voice rang out like the crack of a whiplash:

"Hi-yi! G'long, git goin', yuh jugheads!"

Snorting and whistling, the six horses plunged forward. The stage jerked ahead with a neck-breaking wrench, then settled to a scudding swoop as the horses caught their stride. The grey-eyed man crouched low, bullets zipping past him. The driver, slumped between his knees, muttered directions about the road:

"Keep to the right when yuh pass that red butte—that off-wheeler's got a tender mouth. Bad turn t'other side the gully. Yuh'd oughter gain on 'em after yuh top the rise."

"Take it easy, old-timer," growled the grey-eyed man. "We'll give 'em the slip if they don't wing me 'fore we top the rise. Who the devil are they?"

"The Frasers," muttered the driver. "They got *me*, all right!"

Over the crest of the low hill thundered the stage. The pursuing riders, urging their panting horses up the slope with quirt and spur, sent a volley of slugs whistling after it as it dipped and vanished. Blood dripped steadily from the furrow in

the grey-eyed man's wounded cheek.

With its six horses at a dead run, the stage whizzed down the steeply winding trail. On one side somber black cliffs reared to the paling stars. On the other was a sheer drop into grey nothingness. At times the wheels seemed to hang over the awful gulf. At others they grazed the iron wall of the cliffs. But the stage roared on without slackening speed.

"Gawd, but yuh kin handle a team!" mumbled the wounded driver.

The grey-eyed man made no answer. Nor did he pay any heed to the cries of the terrified passengers who were being bounced about inside the coach like peas in a running rooster's crop. Bullets still whistled past, but they were becoming fewer, and the thud of the pursuing hoofs grew fainter. The grey-eyed man glanced over his shoulder and could barely make out the shadowy forms of the horsemen against the loom of the cliff.

"Hairpin turn half-a-mile this side the bottom," choked the driver through the blood that welled in his throat. "Gawd, feller, it's cold!"

On swept the stage, alone in the vastness now. And the flying hoofs drummed the dawn up the eastern sky in spears of gold and scarlet and pearl-edged blue. Ahead the snow crests of the mountains flared in rose-drenched silver. The cliffs slipped off their grey night robes and stood naked in hard reds and cobalts and purples.

Water gleamed in the gorges. A bird flung a song-shower of melody into the winy air, the sun lipped the edge of the world with saffron flame, and it was day. Around a final turn boomed the stage and the gaunt buildings of a division station leaped into view.

The grey-eyed man pulled the team to a plunging halt and sighed with relief, but his face grew grim and his mouth tightened as he glanced at the motionless figure between his knees. For there was no comrade-in-arms to rejoice with him that the night's dangers were past. The soldierly driver was dead!

CHAPTER II

Rocky Ridge

A SHOUTING crowd of hairy, unkempt hostlers and station keepers came out to meet the stage. They mingled with the passengers, swore wicked oaths as they gawked at the dead driver, and were suddenly silent under the grey-eyed man's cold stare. The conductor, a quiet, gentlemanly fellow, evidently much shaken by the night's tragic events, helped him lift the driver's body from the boot and lay it on a hastily provided blanket.

"Talk with you in a minute," said the conductor, and hurried into the station.

A little later a big broad-shouldered man shoved the gabbling hostlers aside and faced the grey-eyed man. It was Tom Blanshard, Overland division-agent at Rocky Ridge.

Blanshard was a tall man, but he had to raise his eyes when he looked the other over from fancily stitched high-heeled boots to bare black head. Those boots, the close-fitting shotgun chaps, the blue shirt with handkerchief looped about the neck, and the heavy guns swinging low in their carefully oiled and worked quick-draw holsters said "cowboy" to Blanshard. His crisp voice, incisive with unlimited authority over men and material things, snapped two questions:

"Who are yuh? Where'd yuh come from?"

The other did not answer at once, and when he did it was in a lazy drawl that was deceptively mild.

"Betcha yuh're a whole lot better at questions than answers."

Blanshard stiffened and his hard mouth grew even harder, but the level grey gaze did not waver. Blanshard, shrewd judge of men, did not make a second mistake.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't intend to get personal. Yuh did the Overland Company a mighty good turn t'night and, bein' the division-agent here, naturally I was interested."

Wirt Buckley

The other nodded and flashed white, even teeth in a sudden smile that startlingly changed his lean face. Blanshard found himself smiling in return. The lazy drawl sounded again:

"Jim Duane's my handle—my *right* one—and I'm down from Arizona way."

Blanshard held out his hand and gave his name. "Come into the station," he invited. "I'd take it kind if yuh kin spare time fer a little talk. I'm pretty fair at rough doctor work," he added as Duane nodded acceptance, "and I'll see what I kin do fer that creased cheek. See yuh got a little one side yore head, too."

Half an hour later the two big men regarded each other across a breakfast table.

"It was shore nervy work on yore part," said Blanshard, pouring Duane a second cup of coffee.

"I thought it was sorta nervy the way them jiggers stuck us up," said Jim. "They stepped right out as if they owned the whole territory of Nevada. I wouldn'ta figgered it much o' my bus'ness if they hadn't drilled the driver thataway."

His good-humored mouth hardened and in his sunny, grey-green eyes birthed a chill glitter, like dagger points glinting icily in silver moonlight.

"I knew another 'Jim' once with eyes like that," Blanshard mused to himself. "Jim Slade, the toughest agent the old Overland ever had. This fellow is a lot bigger than him, though, and from what the conductor said, he could give even Slade cards and spades and beat him hands down with a six-shooter."

Jim Duane was speaking.

"I sorta liked that driver feller, and he sho' went out like a man. I got a notion I'd kinda enj'y meetin' up some time with them jiggers what chased us, 'specially if I happen to be forkin' a good cuttin' hoss and don't hafta hang onto the reins like I hadda to keep them stage broncs from climbin' the trees. Six hosses goin' places right now sorta cramps a feller's style."

Duane's remark provided the very opening for which Blanshard was looking.

"Yuh're out of a job right now, I take it?"

JIM nodded. "Uh-huh. Out a hoss, too. Mine stepped in a badger hole three days back and busted his laig. Hadda shoot him. That's how come I was ridin' the stage—headin' fer Lincoln County. Know a feller theah what owns a big spread. Got a notion I might git on ridin' with him."

"Not shore, though?" hazarded Blanshard.

"Nope, not this time o' year. Different when the fall roundups start, month or so from now."

"And in the meanwhile," said Blanshard quickly, "yuh'll be rather at loose ends. Now somebody's got to take over that driver's job, and I haven't a man here I could trust to handle the stage from Rocky Ridge to Goshoot—it's the worst stretch of road on the division, and there's other things to be considered, too. How would yuh like to take over that job fer a while, Duane? The pay is good."

Duane regarded the division agent quietly for a moment.

"What about them *other things?*" he asked softly.

Blanshard's hard mouth set like a bear trap.

"What yuh ran into last night was a sample," he said. "I'll tell yuh what was back of that dry-gulching."

Jim Duane listened with interest to a story that had its beginnings ten years before:

Wade Fraser came to Nevada. He came from Texas. Why did he come? Well, "There's no law west of the Pecos!" Ward Fraser brought with him six covered wagons, well loaded, a few score horses and a sizeable herd of cattle. He looked at the rolling prairie land between what was later to be the Overland stations of Goshoot and Rocky Ridge and said:

"I ain't never seed a finer stretch of rangeland. This is the prime place for a spread. Get them wagons unloaded. We'll build a ranchhouse in that cottonwood grove."

THE dozen hard-faced individuals who had ridden out of Texas with Wade Fraser were accustomed to obeying his orders. They unloaded the wagons and they built the ranchhouse. Later they built it bigger. They also built barns, a bunkhouse and corrals.

Wade Fraser started raising cattle on a large scale. He became one of the first of the Nevada cattle barons. He was little short of being a king over a section of country large as some Eastern states. He came to believe he *was* a king, that his word was law. He backed that "law" with the knives and six-shooters of the men who twirled their loops over his great herds of dogies. He hired men for their handiness with gun or knife as much as for their ability to ride and rope.

Ben Holliday, who had in his hands a large portion of the vast machinery of the Overland Stage Coach Company—hundreds of men and coaches and thousands of horses and mules—decided that a stage line via Goshoot and Rocky Ridge would

Jim Duane

be time-saving and profitable. The thing was done.

But Holliday and the Overland Company had failed to reckon with "King" Wade Fraser. Fraser did not want a stage line across his range, and said so. The Overland people reminded him that he did not own the open range—that it was really Government land. And the war was on!

"Yeah, what yuh saw last night was a sample," concluded Blanshard; "but it's the first time they killed a driver. We have had horses cut loose and stolen, coaches overturned. Barns and hay stacks have been burned and other property destroyed. There's not much law out here and it's a long ways to headquarters.

"This line doesn't carry any mail, so the Federal Government won't help us. The territorial and local law enforcement agencies can't or won't. Fraser is a big man in the territory and he runs this particular county right up to the hilt. I'm tellin' yuh all this so yuh'll understand what yuh'll be up against if yuh take over the job."

Duane mused silently for several minutes. He ran slim, bronzed fin-

gers through his black hair in a gesture characteristic of him when he reached a decision.

"Yeah, I sorta took a likin' to that driver feller," he said softly.

CHAPTER III

Into the Depths

SEVENTY miles from Rocky Ridge to Goshoot. And such miles! Jim Duane quickly learned that an Overland Stage driver had his work cut out for him, and by no even pattern.

"She's a man's job, all right," he told himself at the conclusion of his second round trip. "Gentlin' a remuda of outlaw broncs is a nice comfortable vacation 'side o' this. Darned if I don't like it, though!" he chuckled a little later as he surrounded a vast quantity of ham and eggs and hot biscuits and washed them down with numerous cups of coffee. "And she sho' does make yuh eat," he added. "Now for a little ear poundin'."

Utterly weary, he went to bed and slept the clock around. A hostler wakened him in time to eat breakfast before the stage was due. An hour later he drew on his heavy buckskin gloves, mounted the box and gathered up the reins. A hostler stood at the head of each half-wild horse and held him fast while Jim got ready.

"All right!" he shouted at length. "Let 'em go!"

The men sprang away from the horses and the coach shot from the station at a fast and furious gallop that never altered nor slackened until it thundered up to the next collection of station-huts and stables, ten or twelve miles distant. There the team was unhitched at lightning speed and fresh horses brought from the stables, and away went the stage again.

Jim had several passengers and considerable valuable freight on the seventy-mile trip to Goshoot, the eastern division-station, but when he glanced into the coach as he sauntered from the station for the return trip it was empty save for the conductor, who wore a wide grin. Jim returned the grin.

"What you doin' in theah, yuh work dodger?" he demanded amiably. "Why ain't yuh up top wheah you b'long?"

"I got arg'fied outa my seat," said the conductor. "Yuh'll find 'er occupied."

"What the devil?" demanded Jim, and craned his neck to look up top.

The conductor's seat, behind the driver's, was *not* occupied, but the driver's was—part of it, at least. Jim stared at the occupant and the occupant returned a dimpled smile.

"Are you the driver?"

Jim nodded. "Who put yuh up theah, ma'am?"

The girl tossed her dark, curly head. "Nobody," she retorted. "I did it myself."

"Guess yuh'll need some help gettin' down," Jim said. "C'mon."

The girl drew back angrily. "The station master said I could ride here," she said.

"The station master ain't drivin' this stage," Jim told her. "Come on down outa that and get inside wheah yuh b'long."

For a moment the brown eyes clashed with the grey. The brown were the first to drop. She bit her red lip to hold back a telltale tremble.

"P-please, can't I stay here?" she coaxed. "It's so stuffy inside, and I was in there all the way from Julesburg."

Jim hesitated, although his better judgment told him not to.

"Yuh're liable to get bounced off," he objected.

"I will not," she declared. "I can ride anywhere."

Jim climbed to the box, conscious of the grins of the hostlers who were holding the impatient horses.

"All right," he told her grimly, "but yuh're stayin' heah till we get to the next station. Don't expect me to stop and let yuh down when you start squealin'."

The girl gasped indignantly. "You —you're horrid! And I'll not—squeal!"

Jim's answer was a grunt as he gathered up the reins. "Let 'em go!" he shouted to the hostlers.

Away shot the stage, swaying and rocking.

The girl had edged as far away from Jim as the limits of the seat permitted. She gripped the iron railing with small, sun-golden hands and held on grimly. A spot of color burned brightly in each creamily tanned cheek. Her red lips were slightly parted, showing white little teeth. Her eyes were bright and stormy. She stared straight ahead, and her little, slightly tip-tilted nose was as disdainful as a small nose adorned with a freckle or two could be.

JIM ignored her utterly, giving his entire attention to the charging horses. A mile sped by, two, three. A voice rather small and breathless, sounded above the clatter of the stage:

"If—if I don't—don't squeal before we reach the next station may I stay up here?"

Jim turned his head slightly, and looked into two laughing brown eyes and grinned in spite of himself.

"You win," he nodded. "Yeah, yuh kin stay, long as yuh kin stand it, but hang on tight. Road's pow'ful bad from heah on."

She was still there when they changed horses at the next station, and when they changed at the one following, but she was not near so close to the outer railing as she had been when they pulled out of Goshoot.

"Thank Pete she ain't the talkin' sort, anyhow," Jim congratulated himself. "Driver on this line's got 'nough to 'tend to 'thout any stray gabbin'."

They changed at Kimbel, thirty-five miles from Goshoot, and toiled up a long rise. The girl was beginning to tire, but the wild, fantastic scenery and the breath-quickening exhilaration of the swaying stage top still held her fascinated.

"Wust stretch of road on the division, the next fifteen miles," Jim told her at Kimbel. "Hadn't yuh better go inside now, ma'am?"

"Not unless you tell me I must," she replied; "not until the next station, anyhow."

"Ain't heard no squeals yet," Jim chuckled. "That was the bargain, warn't it?"

They topped the rise and thundered down the long slope. On one side loomed giant cliffs. On the other the outer edge of the road dropped away to dizzy nothingness. Jim tightened his grip on the reins and gave his entire attention to the road. The girl glanced from right to left, her wide, shining eyes missing nothing.

"Look," she exclaimed suddenly, "up the cliff, there. Is it a fire?"

Jim glanced up the face of the beetling cliff they were nearly opposite and saw a puff of bluish smoke near its summit.

"What the—" he began. "Leapin' lizards!"

With all the force of his arm he lashed the horses. They fairly leaped ahead, snorting with pain and anger. Their snorts were drowned by a prodigious rending crash. The whole face of the cliff seemed to mushroom out and rush down upon the flying stage.

Onto the trail roared huge stones and tons of shattered fragments, blotting it out in a vast cloud of dust. The thundering mass grazed the rear wheels of the coach. Had Jim hesitated the barest instant on seeing that telltale puff of smoke as the giant powder exploded, the coach and horses would have been swept off the trail to destruction.

Jim heard the door bang open, saw the conductor lean out, shouting questions; and at that instant the fright-mad horses gripped the bits in their teeth and hurled the stage down the dizzy trail like a scared hurricane.

The conductor was shot through the open door by the first wild careen. Jim saw him roll and bounce along the trail. The girl would have

been thrown from the seat but for Jim's clutching hand.

"Hold onto me!" he shouted. "I gotta try and keep these hellions in the road!"

It was a job for iron nerves, muscles of steel and an eye that made no mistakes. The half-wild horses were insane with terror that seemed to increase rather than diminish. Ears flattened out, eyes glaring, they strained every sinew to get away from that demon of horrific sound that had ripped their nerves to raw and quivering shreds. Jim tautened the reins until they hummed like harp strings, but his efforts had little effect on the terrified animals.

The stage wheels skidded wildly as the horses took a turn at break-neck speed. For one horrible instant Jim knew they were going over the cliff; but the stage took the turn with two wheels hanging in space and reeled and bounded on. Another, almost as bad as the last, set the strained spokes to cracking.

Jim glanced ahead, and his face turned bleak. A gap yawned in the cliff face, through which he could see the glint of water. Here a turbulent mountain stream frothed its way down a steep gully. It had been let under the road by means of a stone conduit and thundered over the cliff lip in a rioting fall. Where it flowed into the conduit a deep pool had formed. Beyond the pool was an almost right-angle turn of the road.

"We'll never make *that* one!" Jim gritted between his set teeth. "Theah's wheah we're goin' over!"

On rushed the stage, roaring and rocking down the tumbling stretch of trail. Jim heard the boom of the waterfall, saw the rippling silver of the pool.

He dropped the taut reins and as the horses faltered he seized the girl in both arms, stood up with her on the dizzily swaying boot and hurled her from him with all his strength.

Straight through the air she shot, her skirts flying wildly. She hit the pool with a prodigious splash and vanished.

Gasping and choking she broke surface and instinctively struck out for the shore. A scream broke from her lips—a scream of agonized despair. Eyes wild and staring, she saw the stage reach the turn. She saw the leaders go down in snorting, pawing confusion. The wheels went to pieces, the coach body slewed around and then the whole crackling, screaming welter vanished over the edge of the cliff.

The horses' humanlike cries thinned away. There was a far-off thudding crash, then utter silence.

Drenched to the skin, moaning, shuddering, the girl dragged herself from the pool. One hand to her trembling lips, she stared at the cliff edge over which coach, horses and driver had vanished. Words seeped between her fingers—sobbing, incoherent words:

Men still talk of that run from

"He—he could have saved himself—he could have jumped, if he hadn't taken time to throw me to safety first. If I hadn't insisted on riding with him—oh! O-o-oh!"

Her voice rose in a rippling scream. Her eyes glared as those of one who looks on the dead rising from a too-shallow grave.

Over the lip of the precipice a face had appeared—a blood-streaked face twisted with strain. A bronzed hand reached up, clutched at a fang of rock. A long body snaked its way over the edge of the road and sank exhausted in the dust. Jim Duane's voice, a trifle shaky, sounded.

"Next time I make that trip, I want me a pair of wings fust!"

"But you're hurt," she added. "Your face is all blood."

"Jest scratched," Jim chuckled. "Yuh see, ma'am, I landed right on the end of my nose, and—will yuh b'lieve it?—my watch dropped outa my pocket in front of me and for one minute and sixteen seconds by that watch I spun around on my nose! I was plumb dizzy when I finally got stopped."

Reaction was setting in for the girl. "I think you're horrid to joke at such a time!" she snapped. "Those poor horses—and the conductor! Maybe he was killed!"

"I been watchin' him amble down the road back theah for the past two minutes," Jim assured her. "He don't look happy, but he's all in one piece."

Rocky Ridge to Virginia City

The girl ran to him, sobbing and crying. "You're not dead? You didn't go over with the stage? Oh! How—where—"

Jim chuckled. "Oh, yeah, I went over, all right. Look down theah."

He pointed over the cliff. The girl dropped to her knees, peered down into the abyss.

Five or six feet below the lip of the cliff was a crumbling ledge a few feet wide.

"I landed on that when I jumped off the seat," Jim told her. "I tried to make the road and fell short. I know all 'bout dyin' now, ma'am, 'cause I never saw that ledge till I hit it, and when I hit I thought it was the bottom and I knowed I was daid."

"Oh, thank God!" the girl choked.

The conductor arrived shortly.

"When I get to Rocky Ridge—if I ever do—I'm quittin'," he stated flatly. "Throwin' lead at yuh is bad enough, but when they take to throwin' whole mountain sides that's a little bit too much! Damn them Frasers, anyhow!"

The girl, who was trying to wring some of the water from her soaked clothing, glanced at him wonderingly. "Frasers?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," said the conductor. "Jim, I saw two jiggers hightailin' it away 'crost the prairie right after that powder let go. They sho' did time her pat fer a long fuse, didn't they?"

Jim nodded without speaking. He was regarding the girl curiously.

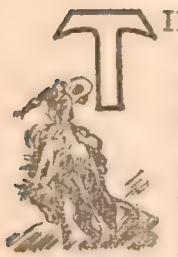
"Ma'am," he said, "I plumb forgot

to ask you wheah you were headin' for on the stage. We gotta figger on gettin' yuh theah somehow."

"Why," replied the girl, "I am going to *Hacienda Encantada*—Enchanted Ranch—that's the Fraser ranch, you know. My uncle, Wade Fraser, lives there. I am Verna Fraser."

CHAPTER IV

Hacienda Encantada



TIRED, dusty, bedraggled, the two men and the girl reached Carter, the next station after Kimbel. The dust had made a woeful mess of the girl's drenched clothing, but Jim thought her more attractive than before.

"Reg'lar little thoroughbred," he commented to himself. "Purty as a spotted yearlin' and game as a road-runner. Not a whimper outa her these five miles, and after all she's been through. Sho' a shame she hasta be tied up with such a mangy outfit. Wonder what she'll think of her Uncle Wade when she heahs 'bout some of the things he's done."

Jim had silenced the conductor after learning the girl's identity. He had no desire to be the first to enlighten her concerning the doings of Wade Fraser.

"Let her find out for herself," he warned the conductor in an aside. "No concern of our'n anyhow—'sides we won't see her again onct we've turned her over to her uncle."

Jim took on the job of "turnin' her over to her uncle." He procured horses at Carter and after a brief rest and a bite to eat, the two set out on a long slant northwest that would lead them eventually to the Fraser ranchhouse.

"We can make it 'fore dark," he assured Verna. "Yuh'll be a whole lot better off theah, if yuh kin stand the ride."

"Stand the ride!" she exclaimed disdainfully. "I used to ride all day on our ranch in Texas, before Dad died. I want to go to that little store over there a minute; and can you find me a room I can use for a little while?"

Jim routed the station master out of his room and turned it over to the girl. She entered with a bulky package purchased at the little general store. She emerged garbed in roomy overalls and jumper.

"I've seen better-looking riding outfits," she admitted, "but it'll do."

"And I *ain't* seen anythin' in any kind of a outfit what was better-lookin'," Jim declared to himself.

He sensed a slight change in the girl's attitude since the conductor's chance remark about the Frasers.

"She ain't dumb," Jim mused. "She knows theah's somethin' off-color in the wind, but she's too smart to ask questions. Betcha she's already got a feelin' inside her that the Overland and the Frasers is on the outs. Well—"

Hacienda Encantada was quite different from what it was when Wade Fraser's henchmen hurriedly threw the big log house together. Much of the original building had been rebuilt. Stone now supplemented the logs. There were wide verandas, an inner *patio* or court, Mexican style.

"Sorta reminds me of south Arizona, only theah ain't no 'dobe bricks used," Jim nodded as the big house set in its spacious grove of cottonwoods hove into view. "Fine-lookin' corrals and barns and bunkhouses. Not a bad outfit to work fer, this, if they didn't have such sorta careless notions 'bout other folks' lives and riggin's."

Wade Fraser had also changed during the years that had passed since he rode out of Texas in a hurry. He had grown even bigger, and his bigness now was a granite massiveness rather than spring-steel and hickory and whipcord as it had formerly been.

His face was craggy and rough-hewn, running to a great beak of a nose, with a jutting chin and square forehead from which his snow-white hair swept back in a crinkly mane. His eyes were hard and cold, of a peculiar shade of frosty blue. His wide mouth was good-humored, but

capable of setting tight in merciless ferocity.

Taken altogether it was not a bad face, Jim decided, but an arrogant and ruthless one. The face of a man who had sold himself the idea that whatever he did must, of necessity, because *he* did it, be right. And who would smash through opposition with little regard for those who might suffer in the course of the smashing.

"If that old jigger'd lived six, seven hundred yeahs ago, he'd built himself a castle on a hill by a cross-roads, dressed himself up in a suit of tin pipe and stove castings and made ev'body what hadda use the road shell out their spare *pesos* 'fore he'd let 'em travel on," Jim summed up.

Fraser greeted his niece with enthusiasm. "Well, well," he rumbled, "if this ain't a surprise—little Verna, all growed up! My, my but yuh done got purty. Look like yore maw, but yuh got the Fraser chin, and I betcha yuh got yore share of the Fraser temper, too."

HE turned a questioning eye toward Jim.

"Unload and set," he invited, and the invitation sounded like an order. "Wanta thank yuh fer bringin' my niece over safe. I didn't have no idea she was gonna git heah for a coupla weeks yet."

"Uh-huh, had a notion you waren't expectin' her heah t'day," Jim conceded dryly.

"Woulda had a team meet her at Julesburg if I'd a' knowed it," Fraser said. "Yuh ride hoss-back all the way from Julesburg, Verna?"

"Why no, Uncle Wade," she replied, "I came most of the way by stage; and oh, Uncle Wade, if it hadn't been for this gentleman I wouldn't have gotten here at all! He saved my life, Uncle Wade!"

Wade Fraser apparently did not hear the last part of her remark. He wet his suddenly dry lips with his tongue, staring at his niece the while.

"Yuh—yuh come from Julesburg on the stage!" he mouthed. "Why—"

"Yes." she broke in, "and I had such an exciting time! I rode on the driver's seat from a place called Goshoot, or something like that, and an explosion or something caused a cliff to fall and it just missed the stage, and the horses ran away, and the stage went over an awful cliff, and Mr. Duane here threw me into a pool of water and was nearly killed himself."

She paused, breathless. Wade Fraser stared at Jim. "Duane!" he breathed.

Jim nodded coldly. "Uh-huh, Jim Duane, Overland Stage driver. Yuh see, Fraser, some sorta careless jiggers set a blast off up top that big cliff five miles t'other side Cartér. Funny thing, but it let loose jest as the stage was passin'. Hosses ran away and them and the stage went over the cliff. Yore niece had a lucky break or she'da gone over too. Them prospectors sho' are careless wheah they plant their powder, and they rode off and left it, too!"

The cowboy's voice was edged with sarcasm that bit through even Wade Fraser's tough hide. Fraser swallowed, glanced fearfully at his niece, evidently wondering uneasily how much of the by-play she understood, and breathed deep relief when he realized that Jim had told her nothing. His hard eyes were almost grateful.

"Unload and—and have somethin' to eat, won't yuh?" he mumbled.

Jim shook his head, gathering the reins of the spare horse in his left hand.

"Nope," he declined, his level gaze never leaving the big ranch owner's face. "I got a invite to eat supper with some rattlesnakes and horned toads and hyderphobia skunks down the road a piece. I'm gonna accept *that* one!"

His glance flickered to the girl, who was staring at him in astonishment.

"Adios, senorita," he nodded. "Better not do any more stage coach ridin'."

He whirled his horse and cantered down the wide drive to the trail. He did not look back.

Verna Fraser turned a bewildered face to her uncle.

"Is the man crazy?" she demanded "What in the world was he talking about?"

Wade Fraser's face was purple and he appeared to have difficulty in breathing. Not for more years than he could remember had anyone dared hurl such an insult in his teeth.

"All stage coach drivers are a little tetched in the haid," he managed to sputter at last.

CHAPTER V

Duane of Rocky Ridge

LONG shadows fell as Jim rode away from *Hacienda Encantada,* and the dusk, like a lovely blue dust, was sifting down from the mountain tops. Jim rounded a turn and the ranchhouse dropped out of view. He rounded another and faced two riders coming from the opposite direction.

One was a stocky, nondescript individual with muddy eyes and an ugly mouth. He looked tough but stupid. Jim ignored him after a single glance.

The other was a man who would merit, and get, more than a single glance in any company. Tall, rangy, with wide shoulders and a wildcat grace, he rode as if he were a part of his horse. His hair, crisply black, was smooth and orderly under the broad-brimmed Stetson tilted back from his forehead. His eyes were black, with a chill glitter in their depths and set just a trifle far apart. His well-formed lips had a slightly cynical twist at the corners.

"So darn good-lookin' I bet it hurts him," Jim muttered.

All this Jim saw in a single glance. In the same glance he saw the look of utter astonishment that blanked the faces of the two men. The stocky one let out a squawl:

"Good gosh, Wirt, it's *him!*"

The other man said nothing, but he acted. Jim caught the lightning fast flicker of his right hand.

Jim Duane shaded the tall man's draw by a split second. His own gun roared while the other was pulling trigger. The other's gun exploded and Jim's bullet arrived at the same instant. The bullet smashed the gun's stock and sent it spinning. It also scooped a neat hunk of meat from the tall man's hand. His howl of pain echoed the double report. Jim's left-hand gun stabbed at the stocky man, his voice bit at the pair of them.

"One more move outa either of you and the buzzards'll eat what the kiyotes leave in the mawnin'! Git yore hands up—higher! Now what's the meanin' of this, anyhow?"

The stocky man started to mouth words. A glance from his companion's glittering eyes and a wordless growl silenced him. The other, blood trickling down his arm, glared at Jim and spat three words:

"Go to hell!"

Jim regarded him with approval. "Got nerve, anyhow," he conceded. His gaze grew speculative.

"Conductor said he saw two gents ridin' away jest after that powder let loose," he mused. "Chances are them same gents would circle Carter and take the long way 'round to get heah. They knowed the stage went off the cliff, all right. No wonder they thought they was seein' a ghost when I ambled 'round the corner jest now."

Aloud he said: "Yeah, it's *'him!'* Now listen, you two horned toads, yuh're storin' up a hefty passel of grief fer yoreselves. What I oughta do right now is blow the pair o' yuh out from under yore hats. Next time —but nev' mind 'bout that; all I got to say is theah better not *be* any next time! Now git goin', and don't do no turnin' 'round!"

The stocky man was shivering like a dog smelling bones. He rode ahead without lowering his hands. Jim plucked his gun from its holster as he passed and tossed it to the ground.

"Yuh kin come back and git it—later," he drawled.

The tall man deliberately lowered his hands, gathered up the reins and rode forward until he was directly opposite Jim. He pulled his horse to a halt and his blazing eyes were but inches from the big puncher's face.

Jim Duane's hands were filled with death

"Feller," he said softly, "theah'll *be* a next time!"

For a long moment the glittering black eyes locked with Jim's cold gaze. Then the tall man rode on and vanished around the turn. Jim watched him out of sight. He still sat watching the bend until the thud of hoofs whispered away into the distance.

"Wonder who *that* jigger is?" he speculated as he caught the led horse which had strayed a short distance. "Strikes me he's the real salty hombre of the Fraser outfit. Old Wade looks tough and is tough, but I got a notion he's jest a nice little woolly ba-ba 'longside that snake-eyed gent with the straight nose. He's the kind what goes to war and comes back a general with a string of medals or stays at home 'cause they ain't no war and ends up wearin' a rope for a necktie. Well, let's git goin', hoss, it's a long ways to Rocky Ridge."

Jim found Tom Blanshard waiting up for him when he reached Rocky Ridge. Word of the wreck had been brought to the division-agent from Carter. He greeted Jim warmly and congratulated him on his escape.

"Yes, yuh did right to get that girl safely home," he agreed. "Now what else yuh got to add to the report of what happened?"

"Couldn't prove a thing, even if we had some law enforcement on our side," Jim said. "All I know—nev' mind what I *think*—is that somebody set off a blast of powder and blowed a mountainside 'crost the trail. I didn't see nobody do it and I didn't see nobody anywheah's 'round. Conductor says he saw a coupla sorta hurried gents ridin' 'crost the prairie after the shot was tetched off; but he wasn't clost enough to tell what they looked like, so that don't mean nothin'. I got a notion who them two gents was, but notions don't go in court. Nope, it's jest a trick the Frasers took. What we gotta try and do is hold some trumps the next play.

"By the way," he added as Blanshard voiced profane comment, "yuh happen to know anythin' 'bout a jigger connected with the Fraser outfit they call Wirt?"

Blanshard snorted more cuss words.

"There's a cross between a catamount, a rattlesnake and a particularly mean streak of lightning up there they call Wirt Buckley. He's Wade Fraser's nephew and his ranch foreman. Fraser's sister married Cole Buckley, who got shot by vigilantes in Montana. Pity they didn't shoot him before he sired that young hellion! He ain't afraid of anything or anybody, and when they were passing out consciences and morals he wasn't at home! He's a dead shot, too, and the fastest hand with a gun in Nevada Territory!"

A GLEAM flickered in the depths of Jim Duane's steady eyes. His slender, bronzed right hand slipped caressingly across the butt of the big black Colt slung low against his thigh.

"Hmm!" he drawled. "Fastest in the hull territory!"

"Yes," said Blanshard, "and he's got brains. I have a strong notion he's the one that figures out most of Wade Fraser's hellishness for him."

Jim nodded absently. "Wouldn't be s'prised," he admitted. "Huh? Wheah'd I heah 'bout him? Oh, I heahd his name mentioned while I was up theah by the ranch."

Under his breath he muttered: "Wade Fraser's nephew! That makes him *her* cousin, sorta, don't it?"

Jim took his run out the following night. As the six horses raced through the star-shot dark he pondered the events of the weeks since he took over the job at Rocky Ridge. He chuckled once at the thought of the elf-faced girl in the big overalls, and his black brows drew together as the softly spoken words of Wirt Buckley rang in his ears—"Theah'll *be* a next time!"

The vertical line in his forehead smoothed out, however, and his grey eyes became sunny again as a golden moon rolled up over the eastern hills and poured beauty like wine from a crystal goblet upon the prairie.

"Wuth a passel of trouble jest to be alive in a country like this," he told the conductor, who was drowsing on the seat behind.

"Uh-huh," grunted that pessimistic individual, "and it takes a damn sight more'n a passel to *keep* alive!"

The trip to Goshoot and back was as quiet as the cowboy reservation in Heaven. It was similar to that spot in the fact that no punchers or other riders put in an appearance during the entire course of the round-trip. The conductor was thankful.

"Whenever I see a jigger on a hoss 'longside this jackrabbit track they calls a road any more, I start reachin' fer my sawed-off shotgun," he confided to Jim.

The driver nodded. "Sho' peaceful 'nough this trip; mebbe the Frasers have done gone and reformed."

They hadn't! Jim found that out before he had been in Rocky Ridge thirty seconds. An excited hostler was pawing at him as he descended from the boot.

"It's the Big Boss, Blanshard," the man gulped. "Up to the station—we got him in bed. Didn't know much else to do—no doctor heah—in bad shape."

"What the hell yuh talkin' 'bout?" Jim demanded. "What's wrong with Blanshard?"

"Shot," the hostler explained, "twict. He—"

But Jim was already headed for the station at a run.

He found Blanshard in bed, very white and very weak. A rough bandage swathed his left shoulder. Another his right leg. When he spoke his voice was little more than a whisper.

"Wirt Buckley," he replied to Jim's question. "Him and me got together in the Last Chance Saloon. He was too fast for me."

Jim nodded without comment and commenced removing the bandages. The shoulder wound, a clean hole high up, gave him little concern; but his eyes grew grave as he examined Blanshard's leg.

The heavy slug had smashed the

bone to bits just above the knee. In the under side of the thigh, where the bullet had come out, was a great ragged opening. Slivers of splintered bone protruded through the purpling flesh.

"When'd this happen, Tom?" Jim asked.

"Late yesterday afternoon," Blanshard whispered. "I done sent to Virginia City for a doctor."

Jim deftly replaced the bandages and stood up, decision on his lean face.

"I'm takin' yuh to Virginia City and the hospital, right away," he said.

He turned to the door, but retraced his steps.

"Tom," he stated rather than asked, "yore a city man from back East, ain'ttcha?"

"Yes," Blanshard replied. "Holliday sent me out here from St. Joe, Missouri. Why?"

Jim spoke as if confirming something to himself. An' 'bout all yuh know 'bout a gun is how to point it and pull the trigger!"

BLANSHARD smiled weakly. "I'm hardly what yuh'd call an expert," he admitted.

Jim Duane's eyes were green and cold as the shimmer of star-burned winter ice, but his voice was softly drawling:

"Uh-huh! And, usin' yore own words, Wirt Buckley is 'the fastest man with a gun in Nevada Territory!' "

With that he left the room. Blanshard stared after him, and seeing in memory those icy eyes and that bleak, drawn face, grinned twistedly through a sigh of pain.

"Somehow I feel sort of sorrier for Wirt Buckley than I do for myself," he murmured.

Passengers were given time for breakfast at Rocky Ridge, so the stage had not yet left. The driver was on his seat, however, and gathering up the reins when Jim arrived. The big cowboy did not mince words.

"Outside," he told the wondering passengers, "and bring yore baggage with yuh. Yuh're takin' the next stage from heah on. Yuh kin put up in the station until it gits heah—won't be long.

"Come down offa that," he ordered the driver. "I'm takin' yore place this trip."

The driver, a discreet man, gave the cowboy's grim face one glance and obeyed. The station master came running up.

"What the hell's goin' on heah?" he demanded.

"I'm usin' this coach to take Blanshard to the hospital," Jim told him quietly.

The station master snarled. "Blanshard give yuh orders to do that?" he shouted.

Jim shook his head. "Nope, I'm doin' the orderin'."

The station master's face flushed fiery red. He was a big man, arrogant with authority. He was used to being obeyed.

"*I'm* givin' the orders 'round heah!" he stormed. "You get them passengers back in that coach and then git the hell away from heah! I'll learn yuh to—"

Jim did not waste time arguing. His right hand flipped to his holster, the big Colt slid out and the long barrel swung in a chopping arc.

The station master went down, bleeding and senseless. Jim holstered his gun and turned to the gaping hostlers.

"Turn the seats back in theah," he told them, gesturing to the coach, "and build a bed with mattresses. Then bring Mr. Blanshard heah and put him on it. Don't take him off his mattress—bring mattress and all.

"You stay in theah with him," he told the conductor, whose 250-mile run extended to Virginia City. "See that he don't get bounced around too much. We ain't got no time to waste and we're gonna bust some records, or all our necks. All right, down theah, let 'em go!"

At a dead run the horses leaped forward. The stage left Rocky Ridge in a cloud of dust and flying stones.

Men still talk of that run by the Overland Stage from Rocky Ridge to Virginia City. Records were broken, and so were heads. Twice

Jim Duane's gun barrel was bloodied by the split scalps of hostlers or station masters who wanted to waste precious minutes in arguing.

Blanshard, delirious on his makeshift bed, was no help. Jim had only a driver's authority to claim fresh horses and what else he needed; but to back that authority he had two guns and a willingness to use them. He got what he wanted!

Haggard, drawn, red-eyed from lack of sleep, he roared into the silver town. There was a hospital in Virginia City, a good one. Virginia City, as a gentleman by the name of Mark Twain was to say one day, "boasted military companies, fire companies, brass bands, banks, hotels, theaters, hurdy-gurdy places, wide-open gambling palaces, political powwows, civic processions, street fights, murders, inquests, riots, a whiskey mill every fifteen steps, a dozen breweries and half a dozen jails and station houses in full operation, and some talk of building a church!"

Virginia City was, in other words, a boom town at the height of flush times. Its hospital was everything that unlimited money and unlimited enthusiasm could provide. Tom Blanshard was turned over to skilled and efficient hands. The head surgeon congratulated Jim Duane.

"The man owes his life to you," said the surgeon. "He'll lose his leg, but if he had reached us only a few hours later we could have done nothing to save him. As it is, he'll probably live to a ripe old age. Yes, I think it best for you to stay here until after we operate and see how he pulls through."

Two days later Blanshard was able to shake hands with Jim and attempt thanks which the big driver cut short.

"If yuh'd cashed in yore chips ,I mighta had some tough jigger what was hard to get along with to work under," he told the division-agent. "I was jest lookin' after my own int'rests, yuh see. "

Blanshard grinned weakly, and called for a telegraph blank. He sent a long message to Ben Holliday at St. Joseph.

Jim stayed in Virginia City three more days and then, assured that Blanshard was well on the road to recovery, went back to Rocky Ridge as a stage passenger. The coach he had driven to Virginia City was already returned to service.

The station master met him at Rocky Ridge with a bandaged head and a respectful demeanor.

"I hope theah's no hard feelin's on yore part, sir," he said.

Jim grinned down at him. "Nope, none 'tall. I guess we was all a mite excited. Glad I didn't do yuh no serious damage. Yeah, Blanshard is gonna get well, but he's short a leg."

The station master handed Jim a long, official-looking envelope.

"It came yesterday by Pony Express," he said. "I got one, too."

Jim noted the St. Joseph postmark and tore the envelope wonderingly. Inside was a single sheet, neatly written and signed with a sprawling signature, "B. Holliday." The letter read:

BULLETIN

Retired on full pay because of injuries suffered in the course of his duties, Thomas A. Blanshard. To replace the same as division-agent, James L. Duane of Rocky Ridge.

CHAPTER VI

Man to Man

JIM'S duties as Overland division-agent were many and varied. He was required to purchase horses, mules, harness, and food for men and beasts. He distributed these things among his stage stations from time to time according to his judgment as to what each station needed.

Wells were dug and stage buildings were erected at his orders. He attended to the paying of station masters, hostlers, blacksmiths, drivers and other employees. He also hired these individuals, and discharged them whenever he saw fit.

His authority over his 250-mile beat was practically unlimited. It was also up to him to keep order among

his turbulent underlings and to protect them and the company's property from depredations at the hands of the lawless. Of these last there were others besides the Frasers to reckon with.

There were gangs of outlaws in the hills about Rocky Ridge and they had caused the Overland much trouble, especially in the matter of horse stealing. Other division-agents, even the efficient Blanshard, had made little progress against them.

Jim Duane made progress, and did it with dispatch. At the head of a band of hostlers and other employees who liked nothing better than a good scrap, he raided the outlaws' camps, shot some and hanged others. He did not wait for them to make trouble for the Overland. He made trouble for them first!

The outlaws, in fact, quickly learned that the new agent was a man who did not fear anything that breathed the breath of life and who was grimly tenacious in hanging onto anything he started.

They let Overland property alone and turned their attention to quarters where there was more chance for profit and less chance of the loose end of a rope or the hot end of a bullet. Jim then turned his attention to more serious matters.

One morning the stage did not arrive on schedule. In fact it did not arrive at all. Hours later the men Jim had sent out to look for it returned with the conductor, several bedraggled passengers and the driver with a broken arm.

"Rope stretched between two trees," the conductor explained. "We were goin' liketty-split when we hit it. Wheel smashed, axle busted, and we hadda shoot the two leaders."

Jim received the report in silence. He gave the necessary orders for the care of the passengers and the injured driver and for bringing in the wrecked coach. Then he carefully cleaned and oiled his guns, saddled his horse and rode on a long slant, northeast.

The grey walls of *Hacienda Encantada* were bathed in mellow sunshine when Jim arrived at the Fraser ranchhouse. The trees were scarlet clad and gold, and the air was like wine, with a sharp autumn tang to it. A dusty powdering of haze crowned the mountains in smoldering flame. The sky was a brassy bowl with pale-blue edges.

"Seems like folks what live in as purty a place as this would be too busy appreciatin' it to find time to raise hell," the division-agent mused. "Well, I rec'lect readin' onct 'bout a jigger what started a ruckus in heaven, and they say that's a sorta purty place, too. That feller caught hell fer it, though, if I remember right," he added. "Well, Wade Fraser ain't no Lucifer, Star of the Mawnin', but I guess theah's 'nough hell left over to spare a little fer him. I got a sorta sneakin' notion it's gonna be up to me to dish it out!"

NOBODY was about when Jim dismounted in front of the wide veranda. He pitched his horse's reins to the ground, knowing that the trained animal would stand without tieing, and climbed the steps. He knocked on the open door and a rumbling voice bade him enter.

Wade Fraser was seated back of a big table in a big room. Surprise flickered across his craggy face when he saw who his visitor was. He shoved his chair back and stared. Jim noted that the heavy guns he wore were free of the chair arms and that Fraser's square hands were resting easily close to the black butts. Jim wasted no time getting to the business that brought him.

"Fraser," he said, "mebbe yuh don't know it, but I'm division-agent at Rocky Ridge now."

Wade Fraser spoke out of the corner of his hard mouth.

"So what?"

"Jest this," Jim told him flatly. "From now on the Overland coaches are goin' through, and goin' through on time. If theah's any more blowin' cliffs down with powder or stretchin' ropes 'tween trees, or anythin' of that sort, I'm gonna ride over heah with enough of my men to do the job and burn this house and clean yore outfit from garret to cellar.

"I know I can't prove nothin'," he interrupted as Fraser started to speak, "and I know it wouldn't do me any good if I could, with you runnin' the law in this county, so I'm takin' the law in my own hands from now on. Un'stand?"

Wade Fraser's eyes were gorged with wrath. His face was purple and it worked convulsively. Twice he tried to speak, and his anger choked him. With a wordless howl he went for his guns.

Hands gripping the butts, he froze, eyes bulging. Where the black-muzzled Colts that yawned at him across the table came from, Wade Fraser could not have told. One instant Jim Duane's hands were empty, the next they were filled with death.

His draw had been so smoothly swift as to make Fraser look foolish. The knowledge of this fanned the rancher's fury to a white-hot flame. For a mad moment he was tempted to draw anyhow, and for that moment Wade Fraser looked across into eternity. It wasn't far!

REASON came to his rescue. His hands dropped away from his holsters.

Jim leathered his own guns and stood waiting, his level green gaze boring Fraser's hot eyes.

"Well?" he drawled.

Fraser wet his dry lips. "I heerd yuh the fust time," he said, his voice still thick with passion.

"All right," Jim nodded. "Pay attenshun!"

Deliberately he turned his back on the ranch owner and walked to the door. Fraser watched him go in helpless fury. For Wade Fraser could no more shoot a man in the back than could Jim himself.

"But I wouldn't trust that snake-eyed nephew of his'n," he muttered. "That jigger don't let no tricks pass!"

Jim stepped onto the veranda, and slewed sideward with catlike speed.

Crash!

The gun flamed so close that it seared his cheek. The bullet yelled over his shoulder. Jim launched a savage blow that caught the wielder on the wrist. The weapon spun out of his hand and Jim leaped back, his own guns coming.

His eyes black fire in his white face, Wirt Buckley stood at the edge of the top step, gripping his numbed right arm with his left hand. He glared at the crouched cowboy and at the unwavering muzzles of the big sixes. Old Wade Fraser was pounding through the hall, roaring curses. Jim's left-hand gun stabbed at him as he emerged.

"Take it easy, you," he snapped, "'less yuh want this head sidewinder of yores drilled dead center. He's sho' got it comin' to him and I've a notion to do it anyway."

Wirt Buckley's perfectly formed lips writhed in a sneer. His voice was cool, steady:

"Uh-huh, yuh're a tough hombre, aintcha? When yuh got the drop on a unarmed man. If it warn't for them hawglegs backin' yuh up, I'd tie yore damn legs 'round yore neck and let yuh wear 'em that way for a necktie."

Jim Duane came slowly out of his crouch. Black and green glances crossed like rapier blades. Wade Fraser was utterly forgotten.

With smooth grace Jim holstered his guns. His words flung at Buckley like bullets:

"Feller, yuh done asked for it, and yuh're sho' gonna git it!"

He ripped the filled cartridge belt from about his waist, wrapped it around the holstered guns and thrust it at Wade Fraser.

"Hold it," he snapped. "Me and this heah big-talkin' gent is gonna settle this man to man!"

Wade Fraser took the belt, a grin pulling at the corners of his wide mouth, which now was not in the least hard or bad-tempered. There was a warm light in his eyes.

"Cal'late yuh'd better get down on the ground," he said dryly. "I don't want my porch furniture all busted up."

Wirt Buckley led the way, Jim treading close on his heels. Hardly had the Fraser foreman set foot on the ground when he whirled and struck.

Jim took that one squarely on the mouth. He took cut lips and loosened teeth from it, too.

"Jigger kin hit," he told himself as he reeled back a pace.

Wirt Buckley came on, and met a straight right that rocked him back on his heels. A left jab hurled him sideways and another straight right sent him to the ground, cursing and spitting blood. He came to his feet like a coiled spring and lifted Jim clean off his toes with a slashing uppercut.

With a howl of fury he hurled himself on the fallen man and the two rolled about, striking, gouging, butting.

They broke finally and surged to their feet. For an instant they stood glaring, panting for breath, then they went at it again.

Toe to toe they stood, and slugged, laughing and jeering at each other with bloody lips. A curiously impersonal light, almost friendly, was birthing in the eyes of each. It was the unconscious tribute of one fighting man to another.

Buckley was the first to give ground, but he ripped and tore at Jim with short, vicious hooks every time the cowboy tried to close in. Both men were breathing hard now, and their movements were uncertain.

With surprising suddenness the end came. Buckley missed a wild swing and they clinched. The heavier of the two, he tried to bear Jim down with his weight. Jim apparently yielded, reeling back. Buckley rushed and Jim stooped and caught him about the thighs. With a tremendous heave he hurled Buckley over his shoulder.

The foreman flew through the air as if he had taken unto himself wings, arms and legs revolving wildly. He struck the ground with an ominous thud, flopped over on his face and lay still, arms wide flung.

Jim staggered over to him and gazed down into the bloody, distorted face. The voice of Wade Fraser came from the veranda:

"Hurt much?"

"Jest knocked the senses out of him, I cal'late," Jim mumbled. "I'll see if I kin snap him outa it."

He squatted beside Buckley and shook him. The other's chest was rising and falling strongly and Jim decided he was little the worse for his tumble.

"Mebbe this'll work," he told Fraser, who was coming down the steps.

He slapped Buckley's face sharply, hoping that the sting of the swift blow would rouse him. Buckley grunted, and Jim slapped him again. Then he tumbled back on his heels, his own cheek tingling from the blow of a hard little hand.

"You beast! You utter beast!"

Verna Fraser stood over him, her creamily tanned cheeks flushed, her dark eyes filled with storm-lightnings. Her red lips were trembling with anger. Jim absently noted how the crisp autumn wind wantoned her dark curls about her white forehead.

"You beast!" she repeated. "To strike an unconscious man!"

Jim got to his feet, his own cheeks reddening. He started to speak, thought better of it and turned his back on the girl. He strode over to Wade Fraser.

"I'll take 'em now," he said quietly, reaching for his gun belt. Old Wade chuckled deep in his throat.

"You ain't bad," he conceded, "but yuh're bitin' off more than yuh kin chaw. This is my range yore damn stage coaches are wheelin' over and I'm gonna run it to suit myself. The next time you come over heah, come shootin'."

CHAPTER VII

Fate's Hand

DUANE rode back to Rocky Ridge feeling he had not accomplished much. He had garnered a good deal of personal satisfaction out of trouncing Wirt Buckley, but the girl's misconception of his treatment of the fallen man had robbed him of much of that.

"Cal'late she's done got herself

loco over that good-lookin' sidewinder," he growled. "Of co'hse it ain't none of my bus'ness, but I hate to see a sorta nice girl throw herself away on sech a critter. Hell!"

His feeling toward Wade Fraser was disquieting.

"If things were different, darned if I don't b'lieve I'd kinda like that old hellion," he admitted. "I got a notion he ain't a half bad sort if he's handled right and made to see what's what. He came darn neah makin' me pitch lead at him theah by the table. I sho' thought fer a minute he was gonna chance ev'thing and draw. Well, he'll either leave my stages alone or he'll hafta learn a lesson he won't take to."

Then a little later.

"Funny, ain't it, how one pair of black eyes can be so darn mean-lookin' and another pair so purty?"

Resolutely he put all thoughts of Verna Fraser out of his mind. He "put her out" about fifty times, more or less, during the next twelve hours; and then she rode up to the Rocky Ridge station. She held out a slim little hand and smiled when Jim came to the door.

"I rode over here to tell you I'm sorry for what I said and did yesterday," she said. "Uncle Wade told me all about what happened and what you were trying to do. It was foolish of me to make such a mistake. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Ain't nothin' to forgive, ma'am," Jim assured her heartily; "but it was sho' nice of you to come over this way."

"I just had to," she replied. "Not that I don't think you are wrong in the w h o l e matter," she added quickly. "You have no business running your old stage coaches over Uncle Wade's range without his leave. Cousin Wirt told me all about the terrible things your company has accused him of—things really done by outlaws who rob the coaches and steal horses."

Jim regarded her curiously. "Your Uncle Wade tell yuh that, too?" he asked.

The girl shook her head. "No, I didn't ask him. I don't want to worry him with such matters. Cousin Wirt volunteered the information when I told him about the wreck in which I so nearly got killed."

"Uh-huh," Jim nodded dryly, "he would!"

"He told me you threatened Uncle Wade, that's why he fought with you," she added accusingly. "Do you know you broke one of his teeth and blackened both his eyes?"

Jim smothered a grin.

"I 'spect he did that when he slipped and fell down," he told her gravely.

"I don't see any sense in it all," she said. "You two ought to be friends. Well, I'll have to be riding back before it gets dark."

"Yuh'll have something to eat fust," Jim said. "And," he added, impulsively, "I'll ride part of the way with yuh."

JIM expected more trouble from the Frazers, but it didn't materialize immediately.

"Cookin' up somethin' pertickerly hellish, chances are," he told the station master. "I betcha she'll be a lulu when she does break."

And then Fate decided to take a hand.

Rocky Ridge boasted two saloons. Old Barney Echols, who made a hatful of money in silver mines, owned one, the Gulp and Guzzle. Old Barney once made a trip to Virginia City and went on a drunk with another silver nabob.

The nabob's residence, along with other eccentricities, was decked out with French windows that extended from floor to ceiling. Those French windows made a profound impression on Barney. With the result that when he returned to Rocky Ridge, several bulky packages followed him, via mule freight wagon.

Soon afterward the inhabitants of Rocky Ridge gazed with astonishment on the only log-and-mud saloon building in the world with French windows! Those windows were the pride of Barney's heart.

It was late afternoon and the

Gulp and Guzzle was crowded. Outside sounded a thunder of galloping hoofs. There was a screeching yell, a terrific crash and one of the French windows flew into a million pieces.

Through the splintered wreck came a snorting horse with a wild-eyed man astride him. Through the cursing, scattering crowd plunged the bronc and right up to the bar. His rider let out a long, screeching whoop and waved a buckskin sack above his head.

"Gold!" he howled. "Gold in the hills nawth of town! Pails of it! Bushels of it! Tons of it! All you gotta do is stoop over and pick it up! Look heah!"

Down came the sack, bottom up. Over the bar cascaded a heap of yellow dust and thumping nuggets. The man on horseback yelled like an Indian.

"Drinks for ev'body! Keep the change, bartender, I got more, lots more! Boys, it's the richest thing ever! It'll make Californy and Gold Hill look like a 'bilin' of beans! *Whoope-e-e-e!*"

Men crowded the bar, glared at the yellow heap, ran their fingers through it. The barkeep scooped it into a pan, knocked the necks off half a dozen whiskey bottles and began sloshing drinks into glasses.

"Drink hearty, gents," he bawled. "This is the last round I'm servin'. Me, I'm grabbin' me a pick and shovel and goin' travelin'!"

A long-drawn yell greeted the words, and the stampede was on!

The strike was no flash-in-the-pan business, either. It was the real thing. Men streamed into the hills empty-handed, and streamed back laden with dust. They filed claims, caroused wildly for a night and rushed back to the hills. The news spread far and wide and Rocky Ridge knew such another rush as California in 'Forty-nine.

Almost overnight Rocky Ridge changed from a straggling cow and stage town to a roaring city. The French windows of the Gulp and Guzzle faded to insignificance before plate glass and brick and stucco. Where there had been two saloons, soon there were two dozen, all doing a booming business.

Men whom even good-natured Barney Echols wouldn't have trusted for a drink were howling drunk on imported wine and expensive whiskey. The back bars sported mirrors and were lined with multi-colored bottles. Those bottles were chiefly for display, however. The brawny argonauts of Rocky Ridge took their whiskey straight, with a second drink for a chaser!

Added to the saloons were gambling houses and dancehalls. Softly glowing red lights, familiar enough in the cities of the East, but up to now unknown in the clean hills, put in their appearance. Also gamblers with white collars and whiter faces. There had been few women in Rocky Ridge. Now there were many, red of lip and of cheek, with calculating hawk-eyes for the most part. The gold miners didn't care how the eyes looked, however, just so they were bright and warm and ready to glance invitation.

THE dance floors hummed to the click of French heels, the thump of muddy boots. Yells, curses, and what passed for song, quivered the crystal air of the hills. The flaming stars of Nevada paled to the brassy glare of Rocky Ridge.

"She's a hell-town fer sho'," Jim Duane said, "and more hell's comin' ev'ry day by the wagonload!"

Overland Stage business doubled, trebled, quadrupled. Jim's duties had been heavy before. Now they were legion. Added to his cares were the loads his coaches now carried east to Great Salt Lake and west to Virginia City. Grim-faced men with sawed-off shotguns across their knees rode beside the drivers and conductors, to guard the gold shipments entrusted to Overland care.

Also, wealthy passengers who carried much money poured into Rocky Ridge from east and west. More than once, outlaws from the hills attempted forays, and were beaten off.

"Looks like we'll hafta go ridin' again soon," Jim told the station master. "Anyhow, we seem to have sorta cramped the Frasers' style. Ain't heard hide nor hair of 'em fer a month."

The station master was pessimistic.

"Don't yuh be so sho'," he warned. "Old Wade ain't the sort to give in easy, and that shiftless skunk, Wirt Buckley, ain't never gonna fergit the trimmin' yuh handed him. Yeah, I heerd 'bout it, and so has ev'body else.

"Buckley ain't loved over-much by his men and a couple of 'em was peekin' 'round the corner of the bunkhouse and huggin' each other they were so tickled when yuh was wipin' up the landscape with him. Wirt came darn neah shootin' John Hansford over to the Last Chance jest 'cause John asked him a question 'bout it."

Jim grew thoughtful.

"Buckley's been comin' to town, then?"

"Uh-huh, him and six, seven of his hellions. They been kickin' up quite a r u c k u s, too. Town marshal squawked, but Wirt told him he'd shove his own gun barrel down his throat 'thout filin' the sight, and the marshal's let 'em alone since then."

Jim shook his head. "That kinda stuff ain't right," he declared. "This town is bad enough 'thout a bunch of outlaws gettin' the upper hand an' runnin' it."

"Guess it ain't hardly none o' our affair," demurred the station master.

"Anythin' that touches Overland bus'ness is our affair," Jim corrected. "Our stations are heah and our eatin' houses and sleepin' places, both for our men and passengers. They got to be protected, and if the Fraser outfit gets to runnin' things, that won't be no easy job."

The station master pondered.

"Come to think on it, Wirt and his gang is mighty liberal 'bout buyin' drinks and things fer the crowd what hangs 'round the saloons and dancehalls," he recalled. "Wonder if that means anythin'?"

"Might mean a whole lot," Jim admitted. "Buckley may be buildin' up a followin'. Yuh know what happened in 'Frisco and Gold Hill and Virginia City. That's the way it was done, and things finally got so bad the miners had to form vigilance committees and clean house. It was a bloody bus'ness and would've been one hell of a sight easier if they'd started 'fore the outlaw gangs got control."

CHAPTER VIII

Guns in the Dark

HE thought seriously about the matter. He was thinking about it two nights later when he stepped into Barney Echols' new Gulp and Guzzle Saloon with its elaborate bar, its big dance floor and its roulette wheels, crap tables, faro outfits and other gambling equipment. Barney had more money than he knew what to do with and he had spent plenty on the new place.

"Looks like a cow chambermaid's dream of heaven," Jim grinned to himself as he ordered a drink. "She's sho' steppin' high, wide and handsome t'night!"

The long bar was crowded, the dance floor equally so. The roulette wheels spun dizzily, dice clicked and rattled, bottle necks clinked against glasses. A riotous uproar of song and laughter and talk boiled through the swinging doors and set the flames of the big hanging lamps to flickering. Miners in blue shirts swung silken clad girls to the music of violins and guitars. Tall cowboys in colorful garb clicked high heels on the highly polished floor.

Now and then the swarthy face and gaudy *serape* of a Mexican drifted past. A wooden-faced Indian wrapped in a scarlet blanket peered somberly through a window and then stalked on to some place more to his liking. Glittering gold pieces and sacks of dust rattled and thumped on the bar. A golden flood

was pouring across the gambling tables. The girls were reaping a harvest.

"It looks like a big night, Mr. Duane," a bartender greeted Jim cordially. "Lots of the boys are in from the hills and several big cattle drives are holdin' over. Have another one?"

Jim toyed with his second drink, watching the colorful play on the dance floor. Things looked gay, but peaceful, and yet, inside of him a tenseness was building up. Jim Duane had ridden for many years with danger as his saddle companion. From those years of hair-trigger watchfulness and expectancy he had developed what was almost a sixth sense that warned him of impending events. He turned quickly at a touch on his elbow, right hand dropping to his thigh.

A slender, boyish figure garbed in overalls and worn chaps stood before him. He could see little of the face because of a wide hat pulled low and a black silk handkerchief muffled high about the throat; but he instantly recognized the voice:

"I want to speak with you a moment."

Jim thrilled to the low, throaty tones.

"That way she's got of talkin' sho' does do things to a man," he told himself. Aloud he said, "Sho', let's go over to that table in the corner."

The girl led the way, attracting no attention in her boyish costume. An observant person might have suspected the truth from the grace of her walk and the slight sway of her hips, but Gulp and Guzzle whiskey did not tend to make folks observant. They reached the table without attracting attention.

"Yuh ain't got no bus'ness runnin' 'round loose in this town after dark," Jim remonstrated as soon as they were seated and a waiter had scurried away with their order.

Verna Fraser's red lips quirked in a tantalizing smile.

"I love it!" she exclaimed. "It's almost as much fun as riding on top of a stage coach."

"Uh-huh, and remember what came darn neah happenin' to yuh the last time yuh rode top a stage coach," Jim reminded her.

Verna tossed her head. "It didn't happen, though, and I wouldn't have missed what *did* happen for worlds."

Jim growled in his throat.

"Yuh'd oughta be spanked!" he declared. "I'd do it myself if yuh be—if—"

The final words died unspoken, but something in his tone, something in his look, brought a wave of bright color rushing into the girl's cheeks. Her eyes, great dark pools of light in the shadow of the wide hat, wavered, and her long curling lashes swept down.

SHE flashed a questioning glance through their silken veil that made Jim wonder if it was really the whiskey he had drunk that caused the room suddenly to whirl so dizzily. For a long moment there was silence.

Suddenly her dark head flung up, her eyes opened wide. Her voice sounded—urgent, fearful:

"You—you made me forget why I came! Listen, you are in danger—deadly danger. My cousin Wirt, he has never forgiven you for what you did to him that afternoon. He is coming here to kill you!"

Jim did not appear particularly impressed. "Uh-huh? That's been tried before, by tougher hombres than Wirt Buckley."

"But you don't understand!" exclaimed the girl, suddenly frantic with apprehension. "He—he is not coming alone. His men are with him, and there are others here in town who will do what he tells them."

Jim asked a question:

"How yuh know all this, ma'am?"

"Wirt suggested it to Uncle Wade. He told Uncle that if you were out of the way, the Overland Company would be forced to come to terms and grant his demands. Uncle Wade admitted that might be so, but he said he wouldn't countenance any such killing. He said he had always

fought fair and he always intended to. I think he rather likes you," she added softly.

"What'd Buckley say to that?" Jim asked.

"He didn't like it," Verna admitted. "He argued for a while and then appeared to give in. I—I thought he agreed with Uncle Wade too quickly for him. When he left the room he went straight to the bunkhouse, where the men were. I—I followed him and—listened!"

Jim suddenly felt warm all over. "And when yuh found out what they was up to, yuh rode here to tell me! Why?"

THE girl's lashes fluttered down again, but she looked up quickly. "After all, you saved my life."

"Uh-huh," Jim nodded, "guess that's so."

There was a hint of dejection in his voice that caused a dimple to appear fleetingly at the corner of Verna's red mouth; but it vanished as quickly as did the sudden warm light in her dark eyes.

"I went to the station first," she said. "They told me you were somewhere in town. I've been looking everywhere. Please, won't you go to the station and stay there until this trouble blows over? Wirt and his men may reach town any minute."

"Don't yuh worry yore purty haid—" Jim began, and clipped the sentence short.

Men were coming through the swinging doors. Purposeful men in chaps, jingling spurs and wide hats. Their eyes glinted about the big room as if seeking something. They spread out fanwise just inside the door. After them came several hard-faced individuals dressed in nondescript town clothes. All were heavily armed.

"Wirt!" breathed the girl, her face paper white.

Jim Duane's muscular brown hand suddenly clamped on her shoulder. He jerked her from her chair and jammed her to the floor, behind a wide pillar.

"Stay theah!" he clipped.

Men glanced in the direction of the small scuffle and then jumped as a long-drawn yell rang through the saloon:

"Wir-r-rt Bu-u-uckle-ey!"

Old-timers in that saloon went to the floor, behind tables, back of the bar. They recognized that long-drawn yell for what it was—the challenge of the gunfighter of the Old West: "Step out and arg'fy it through smoke!"

Wirt Buckley recognized it, too, and his gun seemed to leap to his hand.

Like crackling thunder, Jim Duane's guns let go, spurting lances of fire toward Buckley's flaming Colt. It was long shooting with a six—clear across the big, poorly lighted room.

Jim's had left his hand as if it had been thrown. A red smear leaped across Buckley's cheek, but his gun still roared. Then suddenly he was down, blood pouring from his creased scalp. With yells of rage his companions went into action and the bellow of six-shooters bulged the walls.

Bullets stormed around Jim, knocking splinters from the floor, drumming into the heavy table top behind which he now crouched. He blasted a volley at his bunched assailants, and both hammers clicked on empty cartridges.

Mumbling curses under his breath, he ejected the spent shells and plucked fresh ones from his belt. Buckley's men, seeing his guns empty, swooped forward.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

The shots came from directly behind Jim; he could feel the heat of the discharges. Down went a man, gripping a bloody shoulder. Another yelled shrilly and wrung his smashed hand. The others crouched, gave a step or two in confusion. Verna Fraser's voice sounded over Jim's shoulder: "Hurry! I'll save the other three shots!"

Jim rammed the last cartridge home. "Good girl!" he barked. "Hold right wheah yuh are a second!"

The big room was in hideous confusion. Cursing men and screeching women jammed the doors, trying to get away from the hail of lead that knocked mirrors and fixtures to pieces. Somebody let go with a sawed-off shotgun from behind the bar. The charge went high and knocked one of the hanging lamps to flaming bits. A knife buzzed through the air and quivered evilly in a door post.

Jim Duane's guns blazed a drumfire of shots toward the crouching, weaving raiders, who were again peppering the table top with lead. Then his guns tipped up and

crackled sharply. The two remaining lamps slammed and jangled as the heavy slugs ripped through them. Black darkness swooped down.

Jim whirled, grabbed Verna Fraser in his arms and went across the room like a singed bat out of the place General Sherman said war was. There was a terrific crash of breaking glass and splintering wood—and Barney Echols had lost another French window!

Jim hit the ground, missed his footing and rolled over and over, the girl still huddled in his arms. He had shielded her as best he could from the flying glass and he had gone through the window so fast that he had sustained but a few minor scratches himself. He scrambled to his feet, dragging her with him, and together they ran swiftly around a corner of the building.

In a dark alley they paused, listening to the howling hullabaloo that still boiled inside the Gulp and Guzzle.

"Sounds like the fellers in theah have decided it ain't no private fight and ev'body can get in," Jim chuckled. "C'mon, Miss Lady, it's long past yore bedtime!"

CHAPTER IX

The Hill Gods Speak

THE story of subsequent events came to Jim from a friendly bartender.

"After ev'body shot away all their shells, things s o r t a quieted down," said the drink juggler. "We got the lights goin' again and found quite a few perforated gents. Didn't nobody seem hurt pertickler bad, though—guess the Devil ain't got his new hot corner ready for bus'ness yet. That feller Buckley who started the row looked purty sick. Guess he'll have one helluva haidache for a while. His crowd patched him and each other up and they all left town. By the way, what became of that young feller what helped yuh out while yuh was loadin'? He was a game one, all right."

"Rode b a c k t o h i s outfit this mawnin'," Jim said, and turned the conversation. "Yeah, it was a lively shindig while it lasted."

"Mebbe it'll teach them fellers not to come heah lookin' fer trouble," predicted the barkeep.

"Mebbe," Jim agreed, but he thought otherwise.

And then the Hill Gods, watching sardonically from their mountain tops the worrisome strivings of the human ants on the plain below, decided to speak a word.

Jim Duane stood anxiously scanning the sky as Hank Monk, driver of the eastbound stage, gathered up his reins. Beside Monk sat a guard with a shotgun across his knees. Another sat beside the conductor. There was yet another inside the stage with a rifle. The stage was carrying a more than usual heavy gold shipment.

"I ain't worryin' much 'bout holdups, with all them hefty jiggers weighted d o w n with hardware along," Jim said, "but I sho' don't like the looks of the weather. Hank, I got a notion to hold yuh heah till we see what comes outa the hills."

"Hell, I'll get through all right," declared Hank Monk, a tough hombre from Arizona. "Who's scared of a little snow?"

"Yuh ain't seen the kind o' snow storms what swoops down all of a sudden outa these mountains," Jim told him. "All right, though," he agreed reluctantly, "we'll risk it. Let 'em go!"

Hank "let 'em go," and away thundered the stage. Jim watched it out of sight and returned to his office where a multitude of details awaited him.

He worked for an hour or so, forgetting the stage and the weather. Suddenly he became aware that the office was curiously dark. He glanced through a window, got up and walked outside.

THE sky was a leaden arch that stretched from horizon to horizon. There were banners flaunting and wavering on the mountain tops. Jim watched the long streamers coil and ripple for a moment.

"That means wind up theah, plenty of it," he muttered. "Wind whippin' the snow loose and blowin' around like flags fastened to a pole."

He turned abruptly and called to a hostler.

"My hoss," he said. "Make it pronto."

"Yuh gonna ride in this weather?" the man asked as he brought Jim's cayuse, saddled and bridled.

"Uh-huh," the division-agent nodded. "I'm gonna trail the stage. That storm's cuttin' down slantwise from the nawtheast and they're liable to run inter it between stations. Hank Monk is a fust-class driver, but he don't know these hills any too well. Theah's jest a chance he might miss the road and get lost."

"Better let me get yuh a heavier coat—"

"Ain't time," Jim said. "Don't figger I'll need it anyhow."

The hostler's face registered disapproval, but he said nothing more. Hostlers didn't argue with division-agents.

Jim rode fast, and as his horse caught its stride and wind, he rode faster. The sky was growing more and more lowering and an icy bite began to make itself felt. A queer, strained hush seemed to hang over the hills.

The first station out of Rocky Ridge reported the coach passing on schedule. So did the second. And still the storm held off. Jim began to feel less uneasy. From time to time he glanced at those weird, disquieting banners that waved and floated from the crest of the mountains to the northeast, hoping to see them falter and sink. With startling abruptness they vanished from his sight. Jim's lips tightened.

"An' that means jest one thing," he told his horse. "Snow's started fallin' up theah, and it's headin' this way hell-bent-fer-election! Shake a leg, yuh jughead!"

The cayuse shook a leg, all four of them, in fact. Jim watched anxiously for the first white flakes to flutter down from the sky.

"Now what the blue blazes is that?" he wondered suddenly.

A vagrant puff of wind, the first herald of the roaring storm blast sweeping down out of the northeast, had carried to his ears the sound of a faint popping, like sharply breaking sticks; then a heavier, duller sound. Jim listened intently, his eyes narrowing.

"Guns," he decided quickly. "Rifles and shotguns. Now what the hell's goin' on?"

Up a long slope labored the horse. He topped the crest and coasted down the opposite hill. The first sifting of tiny white flakes stung Jim's face.

"She's heah," he muttered, "and so's trouble, a-plenty!"

The crackling sound grew swiftly louder and raggeder. Jim noted that the duller booms of the shotgun had ceased. He chafed his chilled hands together and loosened his guns in their holsters. Around a final bend he thundered and the scene ahead leaped through the thickening snowflakes like a painting.

Jammed against a cliff and careening drunkenly on the wreckage of a smashed wheel was the stage. Through a broken window smoke spurted. Jim heard the crack of the rifle. He also saw the bodies of the dead horses and the sprawled forms of driver, conductor and two of the guards. The remaining guard, holed up inside the stage, was evidently making a game fight against odds.

He and his dead companions had already taken toll, as other sprawled bodies among a jumble of rocks flanking the trail bore witness. Crouched amid the rocks were three men, pouring a hot fire into the wrecked coach.

Even as Jim rounded the turn, the end of the unequal fight came. The slim rifle barrel sloping through the smashed window wavered and slid sideways. The sagging door burst open and a body tumbled out, twitched and lay still. A yell of triumph went up from the men among the rocks.

It changed to a howl of warning as Jim charged down the trail. Guns cracked, bullets sang all about him.

Jim went off his horse in a sideways leap. He crouched behind a convenient boulder and let go with both guns. One of the dry-gulchers screeched shrilly and went down. The other two slewed around behind sheltering fangs of stone. Jim recognized Wirt Buckley.

"Theah sho' ain't gonna be no next time after this," he gritted between his set teeth. "Now what?"

Down the trail sounded a thunder of fast hoofs. An instant later two riders burst into view around a bend. One was slim and slight, with dark curls whipping back in the wind. The other was huge and square. His roaring voice drowned the increasing howl of the storm:

"Wirt! Yuh damned dry-gulcher! So I was told straight! Yuh done turned thief!"

Jim saw Wirt Buckley leap to his feet as old Wade Fraser charged down upon him. He saw Fraser jump from the saddle, seize his nephew by the throat and shake him as a terrier shakes a rat. Buckley tried to fend the old man off with his arms, but made no move to use his gun or strike. Jim scrambled from behind his boulder and ran forward.

A gun cracked and Wade Fraser loosed his hold and stumbled backward. The remaining dry-gulcher among the rocks stood up, snarling curses, smoke wisping from the barrel of his Colt. He whirled at the sound of Jim's running feet and shot from the hip.

Jim felt the wind of the passing bullet. His own gun roared and the outlaw fell, kicking and clawing. Jim threw down on Wirt Buckley.

"Get 'em up!' he snapped. "Quick, or—"

Buckley slowly raised his hands. Jim jerked Wirt's gun from its holster and tossed it aside.

"Trail's end, Buckley," he said grimly.

Wirt Buckley nodded, seeming strangely subdued and quiet. Jim turned to Verna, who was kneeling beside Wade Fraser.

"Hurt much?" he asked.

"I—I can't tell," she wavered. "His shirt is all blood."

Watching Buckley from the tail of his eye the while, Jim made a swift examination.

"Shoulder wound, high up," he announced. "Shock knocked him out. Oughta pull through all right, though."

WITH a screeching yell the storm broke in fury. The wind, an icy breath from the north, hurled the hard snow before it like tiny, stinging bullets. Thicker and thicker grew the dancing flakes. Jim's teeth began to chatter.

"Help me get him in the coach," he ordered Buckley.

Haltingly, clumsily, Wirt obeyed, taking the wounded man's legs, while Jim heaved at the big shoulders. Finally they got him into the coach and made him comfortable as possible. Verna sat beside him, holding his still hand. Jim ripped a strip from his own shirt and contrived a rough bandage. The cold was growing more intense by the minute.

Jim stepped out into the storm, a deep furrow between his eyes. He glanced at his horse hunched in the scant shelter of the cliff and barely discernible through the white waste. Three of the outlaws' horses were there also. He turned to Wirt Buckley.

"I've gotta ride back to the station and get help," he said. "Otherwise we'll all freeze to death 'fore this is over. If yuh've got the nerve of a man, yuh won't cut and run for it until the storm stops or I get back. Yuh'll stay heah and do what yuh kin to help."

Wirt Buckley answered quietly.

"Ain't nothin' I kin do heah to help. I'm goin' with yuh. The chances are dead against either of us gettin' through to the station, but two tryin' makes two chances 'gainst one."

JIM considered swiftly, nodded, Buckley was right. Their chances of fighting their way through the blizzard, thinly clad and without stimulants, were slight. But two might succeed where one would fail.

"Grab a hoss," he said. He strode to the stage door and glanced in.

"Bundle this around yuh," he told Verna, tossing her the heavy slicker he wore. "Prop a seat against that busted window and keep the door shut. Be back here with help in a jiffy."

The girl stared at him, her lips white, her eyes dark with suffering.

"I understand," she said quietly. "Please try and—and—come back—to me!"

Up the trail plodded the two horses, shivering in the icy blast. Their riders hunched shoulders against the wind and stared grimly ahead. The snow was already inches deep.

A dozen feet distant nothing was to be seen but a wavering white curtain. The cold was terrific and growing worse every instant. Soon their arms and legs were like lead, although they beat against their sides and kicked the stirrups continually. It was growing darker.

Slumped in the saddle, Jim began to feel a strange numbness stealing over him, a sensation almost of warmth and comfort. He glanced at Buckley. The Fraser foreman was swaying drunkenly. Suddenly he reeled sideward and fell.

Stumping awkwardly on his numb feet, Jim dismounted and knelt beside him.

"Knocked out?" he asked.

Buckley nodded slightly, a ghost of a smile twitching his ashen lips.

"That jigger inside the coach was a damn good shot," he mumbled.

Jim was suddenly aware that the front of Buckley's blue shirt was wet. He ripped the shirt open and disclosed a blue hole a couple of inches below the heart. Dark blood was seeping sluggishly from it.

"Yuh was right, feller," Buckley gasped. "Trail's end!"

He stiffened, relaxed. The sluggish flow from the blue hole ceased. Jim covered the dead stage robber's face and rose to his feet.

"Game!" he told the white waste of the storm. "Bad all the way through, but game as they make 'em! Never let on he'd been plugged. Stuck it out in the saddle till the last minute and cashed in with his boots on. Pity theah warn't a war. What a helluva general he'd 'a' made!"

He turned to his horse, took a step and fell flat on his face. Painfully he arose, clutching the animal's legs, levering himself up by sheer force of will. He tried to mount, and could not. His wooden legs refused to do his bidding. There was no strength left in his arms.

Panting with the effort, he leaned against the saddle and shivered.

With his last failing energy he unlooped his lariat, shortened the rope and tied hard and fast. Then he snugged the noose under his arms, struck the horse smartly on the rump and fell forward in the snow.

The cayuse snorted, leaped ahead convulsively and then settled down to a slow, weary plodding, dragging Jim after him at the end of the rope.

The trail was rocky and rough, but

the snow was already deep enough to save Jim from fatal bruises and lacerations. For a short time the burn and tear of the straining rope kept him conscious, but soon the swirling white waste turned to chill blackness that wrapped him around, fold on fold.

A hostler found the horse shivering before the stable at Carter. He kicked curiously at the white mound behind it and yelled as the snow sluffed off and showed Jim Duane's blue face. Men boiled out of the station and carried the unconscious division-agent in to warmth and treatment. Soon he revived enough to mumble explanations and orders.

Scant minutes later, rescuers, bundled and fortified against the cold, were fighting their way toward the shapeless mound that was the wrecked stage, in which a freezing girl crouched beside an unconscious old man.

Rocky Ridge had built a hospital, among other things. Jim Duane awoke in it. He glanced across at the big figure propped up in the adjoining bed. Wade Fraser grinned response.

"Told yuh he'd come 'round all right," he rumbled to someone out of Jim's sight. "Lazy work dodger was jest sleepin' his haid off."

JIM didn't feel as good as he might, but when Verna Frazer walked around the bed and stood beside him he felt much better. He grinned reply to Wade Fraser's banter.

"Jest restin' up so I'll be all set to start coaches runnin' 'crost yore darned old range once this storm stops," he said.

Old Wade glanced at his niece, who was running her fingers caressingly through Jim's touseled black hair.

"Well, seein' as yore kids'll be inheritin' *Hacienda Encantada* some day, I cal'late theah ain't no more use to argufy," he chuckled.

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE:

MONTANA HELLIONS

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By RUSSELL A. BANKSON

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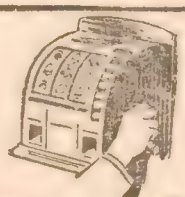

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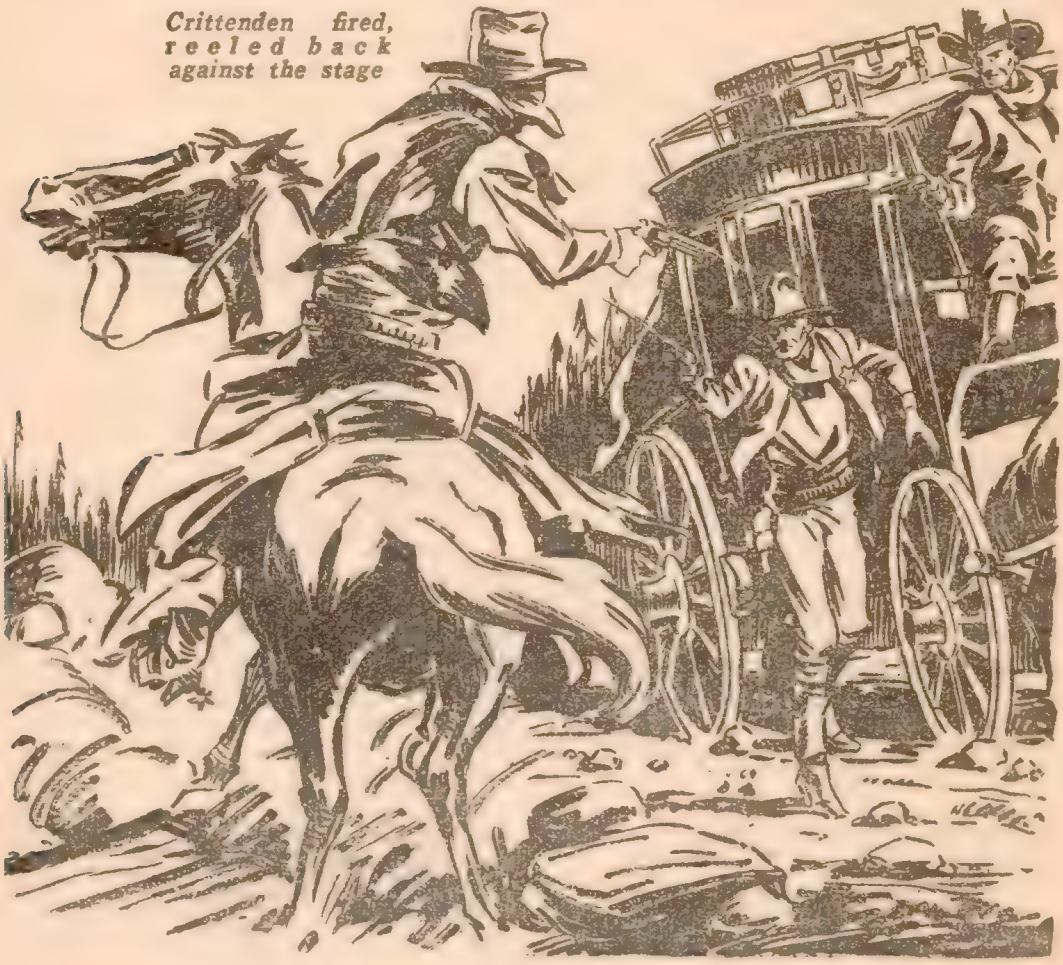

Out-Smarting and Out-Shooting the Foxiest Gunman Around Sombrero Mountain Was a Big Order— and Sheriff Crittenden Had to Fill It!

By NORVELL PAGE

Author of "Canned Goods," "Just Pals," etc.

SHERIFF CRITTENDEN crouched grim-lipped over his six-shooter, bracing himself on the capacious back seat against the perilous lurching of the stage coach for Big Shot. The heavy wheels crunched, horses' hoofs clattered as they went at a pounding trot up the rocky, twisting lane over Sombrero Mountain.

To the left, Crittenden's sun-narrowed blue eyes scanned a muddy, boulder-studded precipice. To the right, they looked into space where the earth dropped three hundred feet to the rocks of Sidewinder River.

Death on either side if the taut-shouldered driver faltered an instant.

"Cain't yuh drive no faster?" Crittenden bellowed at the man.

The driver cursed, but his long whip cracked. The stage lurched more wildly. The bounce of its high springs tossed him about though he clung to the riding strap by his seat. Crittenden shut his straight-lipped mouth tightly beneath its square cut mustache. Dangerous? Sure, dangerous as hell, but safer than the creeping pace that fitted the road.

For the hundredth time, Crittenden flicked a glance at the huddled brown canvas bags about his feet. Fifteen thousand cash, payroll for the mines. And ahead somewhere, sure as death, lurked Monteith.

THE driver's shoulders heaved, throwing the horses around a jutting cliff shoulder on two wheels. Crittenden, swaying to the two-wheeled lurch of the stage, flicked alert gaze ahead. No Monteith yet.

Twice now, the crashing thunder of Crittenden's gun had driven the bandit to cover, and he was waiting for the third battle, for the glint of the gun barrel across the road that would bring him up for the third time with .45 belching lead. A bullet furrow across his leathery cheek, souvenir of their last meeting, glowed blood-red. He spun the full chamber of his six-gun.

There didn't seem to be any hitting this Monteith. He rode a horse that dodged like a jackrabbit and he would not make a standing fight. He either sprang out from cover with blazing pistol, or he braced his man and flashed his shoulder-gun with the dazzling speed that had earned him his name—"Shoulder-gun" Monteith. Crittenden's blue eyes had hate in them. It should be "Murderer" Monteith.

Monteith was not the usual Western outlaw. His holdups were tricky, not a duel of singing lead on the road. He rode the stage as a passenger or he strolled into a bank as a customer before he swept that deadly gun from his armpit with a speed that plucked his slug into the other man's body before a hip-swing six-shooter had fairly cleared the leather.

The heavy stage was laboring uphill now, a steep twisting grade. The four horses were straining against their collars, still lashed to a trot by the fear-urged driver. The left bank, still steep, was gouged by narrow ravines.

Suddenly, a six-gun blasted. Its crashing roar banged against the cliff, whipped along the canyon and through its thunder came the shrill scream of a wounded horse. Crittenden heard the driver curse, heard his whip lash out, felt the sickening lurch of the stage. His lips pulled back from his teeth.

Murderer Monteith had struck!

Crittenden's six-gun was in his right hand. He threw open the stage door and it banged against the body. He swung out onto the step of the wildly lurching coach.

Monteith was not in sight, but the off-lead pinto was up on his hind legs, screaming again, its front hoofs pawing the air. As Crittenden thrust his gun into his belt and shoved his foot in the window to mount the box, the pinto flung forward and lunged into a gallop. The other three horses caught the panic, stampeded with it.

The driver sawed on the reins, foot braced against the long lever brake that locked the rear wheels. It only made the coach rock more wildly—and straight ahead was the crumbling edge of the cliff. Three hundred feet straight down; jagged fangs of rock.

The hind wheels struck a rock, the coach swayed toward the edge and Crittenden's feet flew outward wildly. He was hanging by his hands alone, his fingers clenched about the rail that circled the stage's top. His breath whistled between his clenched teeth. His body banged back against the coach and somehow he jammed his foot again into the window. He hauled himself upward and, behind, heard once more the echoing crash of a gun. He did not hear the lead.

But Crittenden was prone now on the top of the coach. His eyes wid-

ened as he saw how close was the death that yawned ahead for them. The horses were racing like mad, heads down against the savage hopeless sawing of the reins.

"Jump, Sheriff," the driver gasped back over his shoulder. "I can't—"

Crittenden dragged his six-gun from his belt, braced his body and sent a bullet plowing into the spine of the nigh lead horse. The pony went down on its nose, dragging the other lead horse to his knees. The coach reeled like a drunken cowboy. Its rear wheel struck the close-crowding cliff above, sent the stage staggering back toward the precipice, and the wounded leader was up on its hind legs again, squealing, fighting the harness.

Crittenden fired again, missed; snapped another quick shot.

The locked wheels of the stage took hold, sent it slewing toward the cliff edge, steel tires grating futilely on the rocky gravel of the trail. It struck a gully, heeled over on two legs, Crittenden, bracing for another shot, was caught off balance and tumbled head over heels downward. As if his weight had been the one thing the stage needed to be rid of, it teetered a moment, then flopped jouncing back on all fours, perilously close to the edge.

Crittenden struck heavily on his shoulder at the very verge of the cliff. For a fleeting second he seemed to stand on his head. His hat had been tossed off and it soared, tumbling slowly, downward toward the black rocks below. Crittenden's legs kicked wildly. Abruptly he flopped —back toward safety. He reeled to his feet, staggered toward the canted rear of the stage coach, gun still in his fist.

Galloping full tilt toward him, a man crouched on the neck of a dodging horse. A dove-grey hat was rakishly a-tilt, brim flat up with the pressure of the wind. Crittenden's thin lips twisted in a curse. Monteith was unmistakable, just as that cowardly attack had been typical of his strategy. Trying to hurl two men to their death by wounding a horse, so he himself wouldn't have to face gun lead.

Sheriff Crittenden, knees bent, body tense, stepped clear of the body of the coach, and the bandit's gun flashed down. Crittenden flung aside, six-gun belching lead from his hip. The outlaw's slug crunched into the wood of the coach not two inches wide of its mark. A second bullet fanned the sheriff's scarred cheek, but he held his ground. A man shooting from horseback had a tricky job at best.

And Crittenden had leaped to the bandit's left so that Monteith was forced to throw his bullets across his own body. His gun roared again. Damn that jackrabbit horse, weaving in like a boxer. He drew a careful bead, resting his long-barreled Colt across his left forearm.

MONTEITH flopped behind his horse. His spur hooked the cinch. His left hand gripped the bronc's mane. He was using the pony's body as a shield. Under its neck he blazed another shot at Crittenden. A gun banged behind the sheriff. The driver was entering the battle.

One bullet left in Crittenden's gun. Grimly he waited, held it for the instant Monteith would throw a final shot as he dashed by. He trained his gun on the spot where the bandit's head must appear, beneath the pony's neck. His pistol swung with the stride of the racing horse. The bronc's hoofs drummed thunder from the road, streaking nearer. Another two strides, twenty-five feet. The sheriff's trigger finger grew rigid. Monteith was almost upon him.

Under the pony's neck Monteith's gun showed. His masked face gleamed momentarily. Two shots roared out. The horse faltered an instant in its pace, then flashed by.

Crittenden reeled back against the stage, head swinging. He felt the slow, warm pain of blood, raised a quick hand. The bandit's slug had torn through his ear. Cursing, thin-mouthed, he thrust himself erect, stuffed fresh fodder into his gun with fumbling fingers. He stumbled

down toward the shoulder of the road Monteith had rounded, glanced down at the road. Hope gleamed in his eyes. There was blood, great dusty spots of it. Crittenden broke into a heavy run.

He rounded the hill shoulder. The trail stretched its ragged irregular way across the cliff's sere side, empty of life. Crittenden's swift eyes swept the ravines that gouged the precipice. Nothing stirred. He followed the thick-spattered blood trail, but it was no good. Despite the wound, apparently to his horse, Monteith had spurred up one of the defiles that broke the steep grade, and made good his escape. The coach horses were too fagged for pursuit.

Crittenden turned slowly back. The driver, Shorty Cork, a bandy-legged cowpoke turned stage-pilot, was examining the damage to his harness, cutting loose the head horses. As Crittenden came up, he spat expressively.

"That there's twice me an' Monteith had swapped lead," he said. "Next time one of us'll get his'n."

A TENSE crowd waited in front of the post office when the stage rolled two hours late into Big Shot. The fagged rips of Monteith's lead raised shouts and a low mutter of anger, even before Shorty had hauled the two weary horses to a halt.

Crittenden stepped solidly to the ground, his tall, rawhide body still tense with anger. His eyes, blue and chill as iced lakes, invited no questions. He hesitated a moment before the lanky banker, Jim Shanks, starting to tell him of the holdup that nearly succeeded, then he strode on. The crowd opened silently. Shorty climbed out more slowly. In his left hand swung the money bags, in his right, his six-gun. He looked at the men, spat and walked toward the post office.

"When I get back, I'll tell yuh plenty," he said. "That there Crittenden is one fightin' fool."

The sheriff's shoulders hunched impatiently as he walked toward old Doc Sawyer's to have his ear patched up. In his own opinion, Crittenden was "plumb no-'count." Three times he had shot it out with Monteith and the bandit hadn't yet tasted his lead. He didn't even know what the man looked like behind his mask and that made him suspicious of everyone.

The outlaw was one of the most notorious the stage had known in years. There were rewards of close to fifteen thousand dollars on his scheming head. But the man eluded capture. He defied Crittenden who had kept Pueblo County so clear of bad men that for the three years now it had been called Peaceful Pueblo. And he had kept it clean by the simple expedient of an alert eye and a lightning draw. But Monteith had beaten him by trickery, had refused to let Crittenden corner him, force him to stand and draw.

But he would do it, and when he did—Crittenden's long jaw became a knotty muscled ridge of determination—Monteith would pay for all his killings. The sheriff had the cattleman's contempt for the killer's shoulder-gun, a sheepherder's weapon.

It was too slow for a draw on which life itself hung by a split second of advantage over the other man's lead slinging. His own low-slung gun was a blur of speed when he went into action. He had no doubt his slug would beat the other's tricky draw.

But the men Monteith had killed had not doubted their speed, either. The bank guard in Big Shot, where the bandit had made his last successful raid, hadn't doubted his. Yet Monteith's bullet had drilled his breast before the guard's pistol had cleared leather. For all that, this shoulder-gun business seemed sneaky to Crittenden, like shooting in the back.

Suddenly Crittenden spun about facing the shadows of the building that faced the street. A blurred figure showed in the dark. The sheriff's hand flashed to his six-shooter.

"Come out!" he barked. "An' keep yore hands high."

A shadow detached itself from the

buildings and moved forward. "What the heck's the idea, Sheriff?"

Crittenden broke into hoarse laughter, stuck his gun back into its holster. "I'm a-beggin' yore pardon, Mayor," he said, "but I figgered yuh was this Monteith. That guy's been turnin' up so many places that I'm gettin' jumpy. Got where ever'body I see I figger's him."

Mayor Burden joined the sheriff's laughter. "Don't shoot before yuh look," he said. Then he added, "I hear yuh had a run-in with him today."

"Yeah." Crittenden outlined his meeting with the bandit.

The mayor's voice was serious when he answered. "That outlaw is making Peaceful Pueblo into a regular hell-an'-leather bandit section. If something's not done soon we may have to—" His voice trailed off, but Crittenden caught the threat in the mayor's tone.

"There ain't goin' to be need for anythin' special." Crittenden said, flattening each word. "I'll get 'im."

For a long moment Burden stood peering through the darkness at the grim-lipped sheriff. Then he laughed, a short off-key laugh. "This Monteith is getting to be a famous man in these parts. And there's folks besides yuh out lookin' fer that reward—even if most of 'em don't want to see Monteith in person. Somebody said they heard a tramp say he was lookin' fer the reward money, goin' to catch the bandit."

Crittenden laughed, nodded good night to Burden, and went on. It just showed how the man's notoriety had spread. The tramp was not the first stranger to try his hand at getting the reward. But the sheriff intended to collect it himself. It would buy him into a ranch he'd had his eye on this last year. But it was more than merely the money. The bandit's raids were a challenge to his authority in Pueblo. And he intended to accept that challenge, alone.

His only hope would be to corner Monteith and force him to draw on equal terms. Crittenden's flashy upswing with his old six-gun, the bandit's sideward flip of his shoulder-iron.

BUT a month later the sheriff still hadn't struck on a plan for forcing Monteith into such a corner. He rode the stage uneventfully into town, then swung down impatiently. He left the driver and two bank guards to remove the money.

Crittenden turned abruptly into a side street toward his own cabin and supper. He had not gone fifty feet when a fury of gun fire split the air wide open. He spun about and raced back with gun drawn. Beside the stage lay a man. The two guards were slumped against it. Everyone else had vanished. Crittenden saw that the man on the ground was Shorty. He bent over him, groped for a wound.

"I knowed one of us would get it next time," Shorty whispered faintly. "Monteith—pulled down on me from behind."

Crittenden straightened slowly. His jaw knotted. The scar across his cheek flamed. He whirled on the men who now had emerged from their hiding places.

"Yuh yeller-bellied skunks," he roared thickly. "Yuh couldn't throw a gun fer Shorty, but yuh'll git him to a doc *pronto,* or I'll shower down on yuh myself. Now git!"

Bent almost double then, Crittenden moved swiftly along the trail of the bandit's boots in the dust of the road. He had slewed away from the stage with money-bags dragging, then had lifted them, probably swung to his shoulder. Intently Crittenden followed through a narrow alley, saw boots and suddenly jerked his eyes up, gun sweeping with them. He checked his trigger finger just in time.

Lanky Jim Shanks stood before him, hands jerked up swiftly, the white tightness of fear on his face.

Crittenden stared at him narrow-eyed.

"Where yuh been, Shanks?" he demanded sharply.

The whiteness of his face was succeeded by a flush.

"Yuh ain't hintin' nothin', Sheriff, be yuh?" he asked thinly, his hands down now, nearer his gun.

Crittenden thrust his own six-gun away, strode up to the lanky banker and his steely fingers bit into his shoulder, slammed him up against the side of the cabin.

"Answer me!" he bit out. "Shorty Cork's shot, an' I find yuh backtracking the trail of that mangy kiyote Monteith. Talk, and talk fast!"

"Whyn't yuh say so," Shanks mumbled, "without all this here gun-throwing? I was over to the stables, heard the shootin' and come to see what 'twas all about."

Crittenden turned the man loose slowly, staring fixedly into his face. He was a fool to suspect every man he met this way. After all, this alleyway was a familiar shortcut. There was no reason why any man in a hurry shouldn't use it. But this Monteith had him so worked up he suspected everybody.

"Come on with me," he snapped at Shanks and picked up the trail again. It ended in a board walk. Beside it was a muddle of hoofmarks and he could find no one who had seen Monteith's pinto bronc jack-rabbiting away.

Grimly Crittenden swore in a posse, savagely he rode the Pueblo hills in vain. It was hours later when he wearily stabled his horse and stumped off to his office. Evening again, twenty-four hours since Shorty had been shot, twenty-four hours without rest. No results.

His deputy, Rusty Benson, was sitting at the desk, spurs tucked carefully into a drawer on which he had propped his feet. The reddish hair that gave him his nickname bristled from under his thrust-back Stetson. He took a match-stick from between his teeth.

"Well, Chief," he asked, "did yuh get him?"

The sheriff snarled an oath. The startled deputy, his face puzzled, tumbled out of the chair under his chill eyes. Crittenden kept his slit gaze on Rusty.

"Somebody told Monteith what I was figgerin' to do," he said thinly.

Rusty took in the sheriff's tautness, the fixed glare. His mouth closed in a harsh line. Slowly his own eyes thinned.

"Yuh ain't accusin' me?" he demanded.

"Yuh knew my plans," said the sheriff deliberately. "Nobody else but the Shanks' bank did."

His hands hung, the right slightly away from his holster. Rusty tensed. The two officers glared at each other. Fury burned in their eyes. Slowly then the anger went out of Crittenden's and weariness crept in. Fatigue had dug lines in his face.

"HECK!" he said. "I must be goin' loco. Shore I don't think yuh did it, Rusty. This sidewinder Monteith has got me runnin' in circles."

He slumped into a chair. Rusty, mollified, dropped into a chair also.

"What makes yuh think yuh was sold out?" he asked.

"I ain't thinkin' it," Crittenden snapped. "I know. Monteith savvied that the money was comin' in. An' this shipment was so danged secret that nobody but me, you, the banker and the mayor knew it was comin'. Besides he was waitin' at the post office, which shows he knowed it was goin' there instead of to the bank at the other end of town as per usual."

"I'm a cousin to a purple steer," swore Rusty.

Crittenden grunted.

"Run on home, son," he said shortly. "I'll figure this thing out here ef'n it takes all night."

"Better sleep," said Rusty. "Yuh look plumb tuckered out."

Crittenden grunted again. He dug out his old pipe and lighted up. Several hours passed before he got up stiffly, knocked the ashes out of his long cold pipe and went to Rusty's.

"Meet me at the grub shack in a half hour," he told the deputy when he answered his knock. He went directly to the lunchroom itself. As he entered an abrupt silence fell over the several men there. Crittenden glanced at them from under lowering

brows. He nodded shortly to Shanks, wolfing his dinner, and Mayor Burden who sat across the table from him. The sheriff turned to the counter.

As he sat down he glanced into the dirty mirror back of the counter. Shanks and Burden had turned almost sideward in their chairs and were staring at his back.

"Pig strip and hen fruit," Crittenden ordered. *"Pronto."*

A few minutes later Rusty strolled in and sat down beside the sheriff. They nodded to each other briefly. Crittenden finished eating first.

"Step on it, Rusty," he said brusquely. "I want yuh to go to the office with me. Important."

They left without speaking again. At the office Crittenden peered suspiciously out of the window and pulled down the shade. He slowly filled his pipe. Rusty moved restlessly.

"Why all the danged mystery?" he asked impatiently.

Crittenden lighted his pipe deliberately before he answered.

"The bank," he said puffing, "phoned me awhile ago that it's goin' to get in close on fifty thousand gold tomorrow from the mine. I'm bettin' my saddle against a shirt that Monteith tries to corral him some."

SHERIFF CRITTENDEN crouched behind a wooden partition that separated the lobby of the bank from the president's office. Through a crack he watched for Shoulder-gun Monteith. The teller's window, where the bandit would have to get the money, was diagonally across from him. A strange rancher stood there now. His glance about the bank spotted the crack through which Crittenden spied.

The stranger's eyes narrowed slightly. He cashed a small check and walked out. Crittenden abruptly realized he would have to change his hideout. It was too obvious and Monteith would be sure to keep it covered. Crittenden moved across and squatted behind a low solid railing that encircled the cashier's desk.

It was a weary wait. His muscles cramped. His nerves were taut. The craving to smoke became a torture. Yet he must keep hidden and subject every man who entered to a sharp but furtive scrutiny. The only thing he could be sure of was that Monteith would not carry a hip gun. And nowadays many men went without any guns at all, carried their six-shooters only on the range.

Two men entered. At the hip of each swung a pistol. Crittenden shook his head in disappointment. It was nearly closing time and he was beginning to fear Monteith would not come. One of the men left. The other delayed.

Crittenden became restless. His cramped legs demanded relief from the continued strain of squatting on the floor. He cautiously raised his head above the railing. The man still stood in front of the teller's window.

Sun wrinkles about Crittenden's eyes tightened suspiciously.

But there was nothing in his appearance to stir Crittenden's doubts. Apparently he was only arguing with the teller—and he wore a gun on his thigh with a well worn wooden grip. He stood easily, his left arm leaning on the little shelf outside the teller's window.

Then Crittenden's sharp eyes caught an inconspicuous tensing on the man's right shoulder, followed by a lightning-quick jerk. The sheriff yanked out his six-shooter, then checked, puzzled. He had recognized that twitch as would any man of the range whose life often depended on the speed of his draw. It was the first movement of a gunman going for his weapon.

But the stranger's hand had not dropped to his hip. Crittenden glanced toward the teller. His expression had frozen. His startled gaze centered on the stranger at a point just above the shelf. Suddenly Crittenden understood. A shoulder-gun! The hip holster had been a blind. The man was Shoulder-gun Monteith!

A hard grin distorted Crittenden's

face. The bandit's voice rasped across the narrow lobby.

"Jest pass out the money, Mr. Banker," he said. His words were slow and emphatic. "An' don't try no foolishness. I'm Shoulder-gun Monteith and I mean business."

Crittenden went suddenly cold with rage. This was the man who had shot Shorty in the back, a snakey killer. He laid his gun across the railing, centered on the bandit. His eyes a blue flame of anger, he tightened his finger on the trigger. The hammer reared slowly. The chamber clicked around. In another instant the hammer would snap forward, send a bullet plowing into Monteith's spine.

Crittenden shook his head sharply. He eased the hammer safely down again. He couldn't do it, couldn't shoot even a loco lobo like Monteith in the back.

"Eyes front, Monteith," he grated between his teeth. "An' keep—"

Cra-ack!

A bullet smashed through the door of the president's office. Monteith, without turning, had snapped a shot over his left shoulder toward where he thought his challenger was hidden.

"Freeze!" Crittenden barked. "One more like that an' I'll blow yore brains out."

HIS gun centered on Monteith. His words were edged brittlely. This time the bandit heeded. There was no mistaking that voice. Crittenden would do as he said. Monteith stiffened, his eyes straight forward.

"All right, Crittenden," he said softly, "but I've got this jasper with a gun in his belly. Make a move an' I'll plug him. Yuh could blow my gizzard out from the back, all right, but yuh ain't that kind of kiyote, Mr. Crittenden."

It was a deadlock, but the sheriff held the key.

"Yuh're dead right about that, Monteith," he said slowly. "But here's the deal. Yuh think yuh're tarnation fast with that there shoulder-gun of yore'n. I'm goin' to give yuh a chance to throw it. Holster yore smoke iron. I'll do the same and we'll shoot it out even, hip-gun against shoulder-gun. That'll give us both an even break same as we got now. I pass yuh my word on that."

Crittenden thought of Shorty, who had narrowly escaped death. The scar on his cheek was like a burning arrow. His voice grew thick.

"It's a damned sight better'n yuh deserve, yuh yeller bellied skunk," he ripped out.

Monteith laughed shortly.

"If it was any other *hombre,*" he said curtly, "I wouldn't risk gettin' shot with my gun stashed." His voice grew brittle. "Hand over yore smoke-iron, Mr. Banker, butt first. And don't try no tricks."

The teller surrendered his weapon. Monteith tossed it into a corner. Crittenden saw the bandit's clothing bulge as he holstered his pistol, saw Monteith turn stiffly.

The sheriff thrust his own gun loosely into its sheath and stepped over the railing. He and the bandit faced each other across the scant width of the lobby. Not twenty-five feet apart, there was small chance that either would miss. It was strictly a matter of who plugged his man first, the faster draw, shoulder-gun against hip-gun.

Monteith, as Crittenden saw him closely for the first time, was a lanky man, a trifle over middle height. He had jerked his bandanna up over his nose; and his face, presented to Crittenden over his down-sloped shoulder, showed only eyes like arrow slits. The pupils had a metallic glint.

Monteith's left hand grasped his coat at the front edge near the bottom. He would snap it out of the way for his tricky draw. His right hand centered over his breast. His thumb rubbed slowly against his first two fingers. The man was strung as tightly as piano wire.

Crittenden had squared off as if for a fist fight. His feet were braced apart. His left hand with spread fin-

gers was stretched before him for balance. His right hovered like a claw at his hip, ready for the sweeping twisting jerk that would throw his lead in a single incredibly swift movement, his eyes narrowed.

"Whenever yuh're ready, Mr. Shoulder-gun Monteith," he said thickly.

The bandit glared into his eyes for an instant. Then his coat snapped back. There was a sharp double explosion, clapping thunderously against the walls. A gun clattered to the floor. Monteith's hand groped to the .45 at his hip. But he couldn't seem to draw it. Crittenden had spun half about, his shoulder numb under the sledge-hammer blow of lead.

He leaned heavily against the railing. With painful slowness he raised his pistol again, his arm rigid. Monteith suddenly abandoned his struggle to draw the hip-gun and fled in a stumbling run.

Poo-ow!

A crash of breaking glass. Crittenden's second bullet, a fraction late, had smashed the door. The sheriff's feet dragged over the smooth floor. Blood dripped from his dangling left arm. The pain throbbed through his entire body, sickening him.

The teller dashed from his cage, caught the bandit's pistol from the floor. He cursed.

"This gun's jammed," he said.

Crittenden turned his head. The chamber of the pistol was gripped against the dented frame, spattered with lead.

"Blazes!" said Crittenden bitterly. "Jest shot the gun out of his hand. Numbed his arm so he couldn't flash his hip-gun."

Crittenden cached his six-shooter. He bent over a moment, fumbling with the holster. Then his shoulder pushed open the door and he staggered into the street. A dozen men were grouped there. Rusty ran up. A rain of red drops from the sheriff's wound spattered on the steps, but he thrust aside his deputy's proffered help.

"Which way did Monteith get to?" he demanded.

No one seemed to be certain. Two pointed up the street. A third was equally certain he fled in the opposite direction. Crittenden's eyes scanned the street. Jim Shanks was coming at a headlong run, overalls covering his clothing. Crittenden, swaying on his feet, stared at him. He shook his head heavily. Mayor Burden rounded a corner thirty yards away, at a run, saw the crowd.

"Halt!" Crittenden yelled. "Everybody stay put."

Shanks stopped uncertainly, eyes narrow. Mayor Burden halted abruptly at his elbow. Crittenden half fell down the steps, broke into a stumbling run. The crowd looked after him in bewilderment. Had he challenged the mayor or the banker? The same thought occurred to them all. Either way the sheriff's wound had befuddled his mind. They went after him.

CRITTENDEN was close to the two men now; stopped. His foot caught in a hole and he nearly fell. He recovered and wavered forward. Thirty feet from them Crittenden stopped and stood swaying. His left arm hung limply red. The blood-wet sleeve stuck to it. Crittenden braced himself. He was on the verge of collapse, but his shooting hand was steady. "Throw yore gun, yuh range rat," he grated.

Shanks started. Then he saw that the sheriff's gaze was fixed on Burden, whirled toward him.

"I haven't got a gun, Sheriff," the mayor said slowly. His face went slowly white. "I haven't got a gun, damn yuh!"

Crittenden's lips skinned back from his teeth. "Draw," he said, "or I'll drill yuh as yuh stand!"

Mayor Burden raised his hand in a restraining gesture, palm up. "Don't," he said again hoarsely, then his hand darted with dazzling swiftness beneath his coat. His and Crittenden's six-shooters belched lead in a single oddly muffled roar. A single hole showed in the mayor's coat

where his hand had disappeared. Crittenden still rocked unsteadily on his feet.

Burden seemed to shrink, and to grow perceptibly smaller. His gun dropped, fell from his hand like an incredibly heavy weight. He slumped to the ground, rolled over on his back and lay still. Crittenden moved slowly toward him. The others closed in warily. "Are yuh plumb loco?" Rusty demanded. "What the blazes yuh shootin' the mayor for?"

The sheriff stooped painfully over the fallen man and pulled aside the left lapel of his coat. There, binding his shoulder, was the strap for a gun. But there was no holster. Instead there were two horizontal leather slings.

"That there," said the sheriff, "is how he beat a hip-gun to the draw. He didn't pull his smoke-iron, jest shot her through his coat as she rode. Gents, here's Shoulder-gun Monteith's secret."

"Shoulder-gun Monteith!" cried Rusty.

Crittenden bent slowly again, reached into Burden's coat pocket. From it he pulled a wig and false mustache.

"YUH see," Crittenden explained to Rusty when the doctor had made him comfortable. "I figgered the only persons that could have known about that shipment. There weren't but four of us had the low-down on it. And Burden was the only one of the four ain't never been seen around here without a coat.

"Then last night at the grub shack we got the mayor right suspicious with our actions and then give him a chance to listen in at the office. I knowed it had to be Burden or Shanks. And when Monteith tries the holdup today I knows it's Burden. You see, there warn't much money in the bank and Shanks would 'a' knowed that."

"But how," Rusty wanted to know, "did yuh beat that cheatin' draw?"

Crittenden's mouth tightened.

"I ain't so proud of it," he said shortly. "But I had to git him and I knew he was cheatin'. He plugged me in the bank an' I didn't even see the flash of his lead blazer. When we shot it out on the street I was ready for him."

He gestured toward his holster. Rusty squatted and inspected it curiously. The thong that usually bound the end tightly against his thigh swung loose. The leather at the scabbard's end was charred and bullet-torn.

"I didn't flash the old smoke-iron the second time," Crittenden explained. "I untied that there thong before I left the bank. Then, when I braced Mr. Burden Monteith, I jest twisted up and blazed away through leather."

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FIT GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

Smoke Saunders

Bull Gregg's Gunnies Ride Rough Justice on a Lone Hombre Who Deals Colt Medicine to Coyotes of the Rangeland

A Complete Novelette

By GALEN C. COLIN

Author of "Cold Steel—Texas Style," "Them San Pedro Sidewinders," etc.

CHAPTER I

Death Sentence

"TO be hanged by the neck until dead!"

Smoke Saunders had been prepared for the verdict. For six days he had been steeling himself to hear those dread words. His eyes held unblinkingly upon grizzled old Judge Burton's face, as the sentence was pronounced.

The cow-country jury could bring in no other verdict, he had been telling himself. Judge Burton could pronounce no other sentence. It was a frame-up—but the neatest, tightest frame-up that had ever been staged in the whole San Juan range. So tight, in fact, that the young puncher's closest friends hardly doubted his guilt.

Smoke Saunders

A dead hush followed Judge Burton's close-clipped words. Smoke Saunders turned slowly. His smoke-grey eyes swept from the judge to the twelve men in the jury box. They squirmed beneath his gaze that seemed to pierce them through.

He shook his head slightly. Twelve men—no more and no less intelligent than the average. Some of them were his friends, too, and he did not doubt their honesty. Then his gaze swept the taut crowd that filled the little courtroom.

His eyes were narrowed and stormy, as he picked out the seven men who had testified against him. Six of the seven had perjured themselves. Bull Gregg, and his five hard-bitten gun waddies had lied brazenly, but convincingly. And Slim Blaine, one of Smoke's own cowpokes, had sworn reluctantly to a truth that was damaging.

The Gregg outfit leered back into the smoky eyes that burned into their own. But Slim Blaine reddened and dropped his gaze. Smoke's glance picked out others in the room—faces that mirrored many different emotions. Men, for the most part, who had known Smoke's father before him, old Jeremiah Saunders, before lovely Sarah Drennan had married him and tamed him down.

Expert hands worked swiftly with tie-ropes and gags

Even if Smoke Saunders was guilty of killing old Duke Gregg—of pitching his body down the shaft of the deserted Dirty Dutchman mine, as all the evidence seemed to prove—these men felt that the young puncher was more than half justified.

They had watched the Saunders fortunes take the down grade after the death of Sarah Saunders. Partly they blamed old Jeremiah's grief. But more, they blamed Duke Gregg, father of Bull Gregg. For old Duke had taken every advantage of Saunders.

He had caught the J Cross in a pinch, and bought J Cross cattle for a song. He had nibbled at the Saunders range, until it was scarcely more than half its original breadth. And there were those who believed that Duke Gregg had been responsible for Jeremiah Saunders' disappearance, three months before.

WHEN Smoke stood to receive the sentence, the hot room was breathless. The jingle of a spur hurt like the blow of a club. The Box G outfit, Gregg's men, sat close together, their eyes alert. Smoke's friends were scattered in the crowd, but they were just as grim and tense. It needed only a spark to touch off the explosion.

Old Judge Burton seemed to sense this. For no sooner had he pronounced sentence, than he rapped sharply with his gavel.

"The sentence is justified by the evidence. The jury brought in the only possible verdict. The dignity of the law must not be brought into contempt by any outburst. Sheriff, clear the courtroom quietly. Then take your prisoner to the jail to await the day of execution of sentence."

The only outlet of the courtroom was through a narrow, windowless hall, and down an outside stairs to the street. The crowd filed slowly out, while Smoke Saunders stood motionless between the sheriff and the chief deputy. Gregg and his men were the last to leave. Then the officers and their prisoner started, and the judge stepped down from the bench to follow them.

They left the light of the courtroom for the gloom of the hall. For a moment they were the only ones in the twelve-foot length of it. Then there was a sudden flurry, suppressed grunts and deep-throated exclamations, as three men with bandannas over the lower part of their faces, darted from behind the opened door.

Saddle blankets dropped over the officers' heads. Booted feet kicked their legs from beneath them. Expert hands worked swiftly with tie-ropes and gags. One of the masked men thrust a gun in the judge's face.

"Sorry—but y u h ain't hangin' him!"

Smoke was taken by surprise. But he did not hesitate. He grasped the gun-belt and filled holsters that were thrust at him. He buckled it swiftly around his waist.

"The back winder, Smoke! Rope hangin' there! Yore hoss beneath it! Fork him—an' head fer the high country!"

"T h a n k s, *compadres!*" Smoke breathed as he whirled on his heel.

He raced across the deserted courtroom to the window, and swung his lithe body through it. Hand over hand, he slid down the saddle rope that was fastened firmly to the guttering. His black horse, ground-anchored, was within two strides. He vaulted into the saddle, and jammed the rowels home.

The first beat of hoofs reached the crowd in front of the building. Bull Gregg whirled to his men, sensing what had happened.

"He's made a break! After him, hombres! A hundred dollars to the man thet burns him down!"

The Box G outfit raced for their horses. Rowels raked ribs cruelly, as they neck-reined into the dusty street, and plunged around the corner of the rickety building. But even that brief time had given Smoke two hundred yards start. He leaned low over the saddle-horn, and

prodded his black to a burst of speed.

He raced straight into the southwest, for in that direction, ten miles away, lay the J Cross. If he could reach the home spread, he'd have a chance for a clean getaway. He knew the tangled hills and canyons beyond like his own ranch yard.

He shot a glance back over his shoulder. A dozen men were hot on his trail. He recognized the huge, beefy bulk of Bull Gregg; lithe, slender "Sonora" Jennison; squatty, red-faced Parr; and lanky, lantern-jawed Link Morton. Dandy Durkin was well to the front, too—and Skeet Keeler. All Box G riders and henchmen.

Behind the first outfit, almost as many others prodded their mounts. Some of them were his friends, but he was not so sure of the others. He couldn't count upon more than two or three willing to drag their smoke-poles for him.

"ON our own, hoss!" he breathed. "If yuh stumble, I'm a gone maverick!"

Guns b a r k e d sharply! Smoke leaned lower. The distance was too great for accurate shooting, but with enough bullets flying, one might find him. He snatched the 30-30 from its scabbard, thanking the friend who had left it there. He turned and snapped a swift shot at the pursuers. A spurt of dust kicked up in front of Bull Gregg's horse.

"Short! But the next one'll be—"

The muttered words broke off short. Smoke jerked erect, swaying perilously. For a moment he did not realize the meaning of that paralyzing blow that had struck him in the side. He tried to raise his right arm to sheath the rifle, but the muscles did not answer.

He lifted the reins to his teeth, and with his left hand, he loosed the numbed fingers of his right from the rifle stock. As he dropped the weapon into its scabbard, the frightful agony gripped him. His left hand went to his side—and came away crimson.

"Plugged!" The word slid between tight-clenched teeth. "But I—ain't done fer—yet!"

He grasped the reins tighter, and dug his rowels deep. The black stretched to still faster gait. The jolting was like a knife in Smoke Saunders' side, but he held on grimly. Once he shot a backward glance and saw that his pursuers were no more than holding their own.

"They'll foller—like lobos after—a crippled dogie! Wait fer me to drop! They know I'm hit!"

But as the miles unreeled, Smoke forgot those grim men behind—forgot the need of reaching the J Cross—forgot everything but the deadly agony that gripped him, and the numbing weakness that was creeping over him.

"Got to—hang on! Kill me—deader'n a—dogie hide—if'n I fall off!"

He wrapped the reins around the saddle-horn. As he swayed, black spots danced in front of his eyes. He leaned forward and wound his good arm around the fork. With his last ounce of strength, he dug his spurs deep into the hair cinch.

The miles that followed were a nightmare. There was much of that ride that he'd never remember—and the rest would be hazy. Only the frightful pain never left him. Dimly, as from a long distance, a voice reached him. Strain as he would, he could not make out the words.

He tried to open his eyes, but could not. He knew that his horse had stopped, and muttered words came from his swollen lips.

"Go on, hoss! Yuh got to go on!"

And now the horse did move again. He could tell that it was going, from the pain that returned. This time darkness swept over him. Even the deadly agony of his wound faded. He did not know that the black was hidden in a thicket of juniper, when Bull Gregg and his gun-waddies had thundered past—did not know that a slim, brown hand was ready to grasp the animal's nostrils, if it should snort or nicker.

He only dimly knew when the

horse began its journey again, led by that same slim hand, as dusk settled over the hills. He would never know of the miles of rugged ridges, almost impassable canyons, and dangerous ledges and slides that his horse traveled before it came to a final halt.

CHAPTER II

Lobos' Lair

THE Box G headquarters was as grim and forbidding as its owner, Bull Gregg. It huddled like a bird of prey in a niche of a boulder-strewn, pine-studded shoulder of the San Juans. Nor were the men, gathered there under cover of the night, any less ruthless. Their temper was as touchy as giant powder, ready to be set off by a spark.

Every man in the grim gathering watched Bull Gregg—except Dandy Durkin. His glittering black eyes held upon the door that led into the kitchen. And there was a look in his eyes that displaced the killer glare.

Bull Gregg noticed that look, and the twisted sneer on his face deepened. "Keep yore mind off thet gal, Durkin! We've got plenty things more important to 'tend to tonight!"

A soft smile split the expressionless, almost handsome face of the owner of the Red Dog Saloon. "There's nothing more important to me than your sister, Dolores," he said evenly.

"Bah! Time for thet later. The ol' man told yuh thet yuh was free to court Dolores—but not until we'd cleaned up this Saunders deal. But unless I'm plumb mistaken, it's a long way from finished."

"Then yuh ain't figgerin' thet Smoke Saunders was hit fatal—an' dragged hisself off somewheres to die?" asked squat Brandy Parr.

It was Sonora Jennison who answered. "These Smoke hombre ees tough. As hard to keel as a lobo—an' jus' as dangerous. He weel not res' until he has cut down all of us—unless we get heem firs'."

"Sonora's right," Bull Gregg grunted. "An' we can't count on Sheriff Caxton. He's straight—an' he'll comb the hills. But he can't raise a posse to help."

"But what beats me," Link Morton rasped, "is where thet hombre disappeared to. The last we saw of him, he was hangin' onto his saddle like he was nigh done fer."

"He's gone, ain't he?" Bull Gregg bellowed. "Didn't we ride plumb to the J Cross, without ketchin' sight of him after he rounded thet bend? We've got to get him! The Saunders' tribe has got to be plumb wiped out—or we've got no chance at the J Cross!"

"Nor are we safe weeth our lives," Sonora Jennison added softly.

But now Dandy Durkin drummed absently with his long, slender fingers upon the table top. A strange look, cunning and secretive, came into his glittering black eyes.

"And what sets me to wondering," he said slowly, "how come Duke Gregg happened to be standing close to the shaft? And how did Smoke Saunders know he'd be there? And for that matter, why should Smoke push him in?"

Bull Gregg glared at the slim man. Sonora Jennison's black eyes rolled to the beefy-faced rancher, and his hand stole toward the sheath that held his long-bladed knife.

"Yuh ain't thinkin' we tipped off thet Saunders ranny, are yuh? Yuh ain't hintin' thet we wanted the ol' man rubbed out?"

"That might be," Durkin said. "You got the Box G, when Duke Gregg passed out. That slide, filling the shaft, looks a little queer, too. But then it's none of my business—just so I get my cut."

"Morton, Parr, Jennison an' me saw it happen—an' Slim Blaine knowed Smoke Saunders was headin' up toward the shaft! Ain't thet enough?"

"It was—for the judge and jury. But they don't know you hellions like I do."

Then Dandy Durkin spoke slowly, as if voicing his thoughts aloud. "I'd like to've climbed down to the bottom of that shaft, before the slide filled it. Like to've seen ol' Duke's body. Mebbe I'd have found that it wasn't the fall that killed him."

Bull Gregg roared an angry oath. But there was a smile of relief on Sonora Jennison's swarthy face. He breathed deeply, as if a crisis had passed.

"We swore to the truth, Durkin!" Link Morton barked. "Not thet we wouldn't have lied, if'n it was needful. Perjury wouldn't hurt my conscience none—not when it meant a cut of the J Cross spread."

Once more Jennison broke in. "There ees no way to reach Duke Gregg, Durkin. So w'y not take a dreenk, an' forget eet? Right now, what ees mos' needed ees a way to fin' thees Smoke Saunders hombre, no?"

"Good idea," Skeet Keeler grunted. "I'm as dry as an alkali flat."

Bull Gregg swung toward the kitchen door. "Dolores! Bring thet jug, an' four-five tin cups!"

Dandy Durkin turned in his chair, his black eyes hot. His slender fingers strayed to his shiny black hair. He straightened the red silk neckerchief around his throat, as a wolfish smile spread across his face.

The door opened. A slender, willowy girl stepped into the smoke-hazy room. Her brown eyes looked over the heads of the hard-bitten crowd. She held her chin high, and a faint flush of disgust colored her olive cheeks.

Every eye in the room held upon Dolores Gregg—and with good reason. The daughter of old Duke Gregg, and the sister of Bull, was as lovely as they were loathsome. As she passed Dandy Durkin, his hand went out to caress her arm. Her brown eyes blazed, as she shook the hand from her. Without a word, she set the jug and cups upon the table. She turned back toward the kitchen.

But Bull Gregg's voice stopped her. "Yuh been listenin' at the door?"

"No one could help hearing your voice," she answered evenly.

"Mind yuh forget what yuh've heerd!"

"It didn't concern me. But there's one thing I can't forget. A lone rider, badly wounded, gave the slip to a dozen Box G killers." The door closed behind her.

"Blast her, how d'yuh reckon she knowed all thet? Mebbe thet lobo rode this way—holed up somewhere on the Box G range!"

Dandy Durkin rose slowly from his chair. "She heard you beller, Bull. How else could she know?"

Then he turned to Skeet Keeler. "Come on, hombre. You and me are heading for town. Got business to attend to. Be back in time to take up the chase in the morning."

When the door closed behind them, Bull Gregg sent the rest of the outfit—except Jennison—to the bunkhouse. He turned to the half-breed.

"Durkin's got a sort of idea what happened."

Jennison smiled coldly. "Mebbe so—but he cannot prove eet. An' we need heem, Bull—need heem as the hosban' for Dolores."

Bull Gregg nodded. "Yuh're right, Sonora. After they are married—" A grim spread across his face.

Jennison nodded. "But thees Dandy Durkin ees sleeck, Bull. One day he weel wake up an' fin' he ees dead weeth a knife een hees heart, no?"

CHAPTER III

In the Tunnel of Death

SMOKE SAUNDERS woke painfully. For hours he had been on the borderland of death. The jolting of his horse had aggravated his wound, and the loss of blood was almost fatal. Only his iron constitution had kept life in his body.

Slowly, wearily he opened his eyes. In the dim, orange light everything was blurred and indistinct. He stared straight up at jagged rocks, no

more than six feet from his eyes. He blinked — then half-turned until the flickering flame of a lantern caught his gaze.

Beyond it, darkness. With almost unendurable pain, he turned his head in the other direction. Darkness that way, too. As near as he could tell, he was in some sort of a cavern—or maybe a tunnel through the rocks.

Now a gasp, half agony and half amazement burst from his lips. For a slender form had appeared out of the darkness, and was scurrying toward him. At first his hazy eyes could make out no more than a shadowy figure. Slowly the details cleared.

Slim and swarthy—a half-breed, Smoke decided. Barefoot, too, and in cast-off clothing. Then the youngster stood above him. As he looked down, Smoke could read deep concern in the black eyes.

"You—you are alive, *Senor* Smoke? Me, I have fear you weel nevair wake up."

"Yeah. Alive. But a heap more painful than dyin'!"

"That ees from the bullet—an' the fever that come after."

Smoke's eyes narrowed. His head was clearing fast, and the details of his escape—his ride into the hills until he lost consciousness—was coming back to him. There were many things that needed explaining.

"Who are yuh, hombre? Where are we—an' how did I get here?"

"Me, I am Esteban Perez. I breeng you to thees place at the orders of *Senorita* Dolores."

"Dolores Gregg?" Smoke's eyes went wide.

The half-breed nodded. *"Si senor!* She hope that you weel escape—for eef you are hung, she mus' marry to Dandy Durkin. She know, eef you are free, you weel ride toward the J Cross. She send me to watch. I fin' you—an' breeng you here."

Smoke's eyes clouded. Only once had he seen the slender, olive-skinned girl. She was not hard to look at, he remembered—but she was a Gregg. But now the slim half-breed's words changed things greatly.

"So Bull Gregg is forcin' his sister to marry thet gambler, huh? Swappin' her for Dandy Durkin's gun!"

Esteban leaned closer, and his voice dropped as if the rocks had ears. "The *Senorita* Dolores ees not Bull's sister, *Senor* Smoke. Nobody but ol' Duke Gregg an' Bull know eet—excep' me. Bull Gregg would keel me if he even suspec' I know."

"Huh?" Smoke's eyes opened wide. "Not his sister?"

"El padre — my Father — tell me, *senor.* He work for Duke Gregg, until he die. He say Dolores ees onlee niece of *Senora* Gregg, who ees dead these many years."

SMOKE marveled at how this changed his ideas of the dark, lovely girl. Before, she had been a Gregg. Now he recalled her slender beauty, her proud carriage, and her straightforward brown eyes. Of course there could be no Gregg blood in her veins.

"Not Bull's sister! No relation to the Greggs. An' him usin' her as tradin' stock!"

"But that does not explain all, *Senor* Smoke. Bull Gregg know that *Senorita* Dolores have the title to almos' all the Box G range—that eet was in *Senora* Gregg's name, an' that she leave eet een trus' for her sister's daughter. Eet ees part of hees plan to make Dandy Durkin an' *Senorita* Dolores sign what you call waiver to all claim on the Box G, when they are marry. They do not know of the trus' deed—an' Dandy Durkin have promise to make *Senorita* Dolores sign."

"A slick trick!" Smoke rasped. "But not slick enough! Payment is due to the whole outfit—an' it's comin' pronto!"

"Me, Esteban, would glady die for *Senorita* Dolores," said the half-breed softly.

"Yuh can help more alive, hombre! Tell me what yuh know about this frame-up! I didn't kill Duke Gregg! But who did—an' why?"

Esteban shook his head. "Me, I don' know, *Senor* Smoke. But me I

know where he ees—Duke Gregg, an' another."

"Yeah. In the Dirty Dutchman shaft—covered a hundred feet deep with rocks!"

"That ees what Bull Gregg theenk! But when you can walk, *Senor* Smoke, I weel show you!"

"Yuh'll what?" Smoke Saunders sat erect on the blanket. Then, in spite of the dizziness that set him swaying, he forced himself to his feet.

The half-breed leaped to his side, and steadied him with a slim, brown hand. "You mus' not stand yet, *Senor* Smoke! Thees bullet een your side—the blood you have los'—"

Smoke shook the hand from his arm. "I'm not a baby, hombre! A bullet ain't goin' to keep me down always! Yuh was sayin'—"

"Jus' a little while, *Senor* Smoke! Lie down until morning comes. Res' —while I tell you."

Smoke shook his head stubbornly, as he leaned against the rock wall. "No time to be restin', hombre! Speak yore piece! I'll listen—on my feet!"

Esteban heaved a sigh. Then he turned to the left, and gestured toward the darkness of the tunnel beyond the little circle of lantern light.

"Thees ees an abandoned drif' of the Dirty Dutchman, *Senor* Smoke. Een that way, eet lead to the main shaf'."

He turned to the right, and his hand went out in that direction. "An' thees way, the tunnel come out een—the cellar of the Box G!"

"What?" Smoke stiffened, and his voice was tense with excitement. "In the Box G cellar? But don't Bull Gregg—"

Esteban shook his head. "He don' know. Onlee me—an' *Senorita* Dolores. Once the owner of the Dirty Dutchman live een the Box G casa. *El padre* work for them, before they leave. He know of the tunnel—an' he tell me."

Forgotten was his wound—his bruises—his weakness. Smoke Saunders' lean brown face hardened, and his smoky eyes narrowed. His hands stole toward the butts of the six-guns at his hips.

"So the tunnel leads to the Box G! An' Bull Gregg will be there, waitin' for word thet his killers have rounded up Smoke Saunders! Good time to pay him a visit!"

"But no, *Senor* Smoke! Wait! Firs', there ees what weel interest you een the shaf'. Later we weel veesit Bull Gregg, no?"

Smoke whirled to the half-breed. Slowly his hands came away from his holsters. "Yuh said Duke Gregg was in the shaft—him, an' another! Who is the other one, hombre?"

Esteban shook his head. "Me, I'm not sure, *Senor* Smoke. Perhaps you know heem."

For a full minute Smoke hesitated while Esteban looked at him with pleading eyes. At last the young puncher nodded.

"Lead on, younker! We'll take a look!"

THE boy snatched up the lantern. With steps that were gradually growing stronger, Smoke followed. The tunnel twisted and turned for a full two hundred yards. Part of the way it seemed to be a natural passage, cut by some underground stream, ages old. At other spots, the handiwork of men was plainly visible.

Now it bent sharply, and the half-breed slackened his pace. In the lantern light, his face seemed to be pale, and his eyes were wide with dread. Smoke stepped to his side.

"Me, I am afraid, *Senor* Smoke!"

"Afraid of what, hombre?" Smoke barked.

"The spirits of the dead, *Senor!* Onlee once have I seen—an' that time one man—or hees ghos'—groan like *Senor Diabolo*, heemself!"

"Dead men don't groan, hombre! But here—if yuh're scared, give me the lantern!"

With the lantern in his left hand, and his right hovering over his holster, Smoke Saunders edged around the bend in the tunnel. It widened into a circular cavern.

Smoke's gaze shot upward. The light of the lantern barely reached the heavy cross-beams of pine logs far above. He could just make out that these beams held the weight of a jumble of rocks and earth.

"The Dirty Dutchman shaft!" he muttered. "Filled with a slide—but them logs still holdin'!"

Now he swung the lantern in front of him, and took a single step forward. He jerked erect, and a startled grunt came from his lips. For the orange light played on what looked like a shapeless heap of clothing.

Another hesitating step. Smoke's narrowed eyes held upon that formless thing. Now he drew a sharp breath, and he could almost feel the hair rising beneath his Stetson. For the radiance of the lantern brought into bold relief—a distorted face, with sightless, staring eyes.

SMOKE forced himself forward, stood over the heap, and looked down. A shiver chased itself up and down his back. Those staring, ghastly eyes—that death grin! Old Duke Gregg! Duke Gregg—dead for many weeks. But embalmed by some strange freak of air and mineral, in the plugged shaft of the Dirty Dutchman.

By sheer force of will, Smoke made himself hunker beside the body. Stiffly, hesitantly, he thrust out his hand and turned the body over. The light of the lantern flickered on the broad expanse of back, covered with the spotted calfskin vest that was known the range over.

The young puncher leaned lower, and an excited exclamation came from his lips. For there was a great jagged hole squarely in the middle of that back—a hole that could have been made by nothing except a bullet.

"Plugged!" Smoke rasped. "Plugged—an' heaved into the shaft! Now I wonder—"

Swiftly he turned the body back, face up. Gone in his excitement was the reluctance to touch Duke Gregg. He loosed the whang-leather ties and dragged the vest from the stiff body. He tore the shirt from the huge hairy chest. His fingers touched a rounded lump just beneath the skin.

"The bullet!" he grunted.

A quick slash with his knife—and the pellet of lead lay in his palm. He held it closer to the light.

"Home-molded forty-five! Only one gun in the country uses them—Bull Gregg's! Can't buy forty-fives at the store to fit! Loads his own!"

Then Smoke Saunders remembered Esteban's words. "Duke Gregg—an' another," the young half-breed had whispered.

The puncher rose. Almost fearfully, his eyes circled the shaft. Then he jerked erect with a start. He leaned forward, and held the lantern out in front of him. For the dim light had flickered for an instant upon something white. Stiff-legged, Smoke inched toward it, fearful at what he would see.

Then the indrawn breath whistled through his teeth. His smoky eyes narrowed, and grim, hard lines etched themselves deep in his face. For that white splotch was a pair of angora chaps—and they were upon a pair of twisted legs.

Before he saw the twisted, agony-drawn face, Smoke knew. That body on the floor of the shaft was Jeremiah Saunders. No other chaps like those in the whole high country.

With a sound that was half groan and half curse, Smoke dropped to his knees beside the body. He looked again at the pain-twisted face—at the clenched hands—at the oddly crumpled legs. With trembling hands, he tried to straighten those legs. And then it was that he saw the crumpled paper in the rubble.

He picked it up. Only a torn envelope—but killing rage surged over him, as he read the painful scrawl upon it.

Bull Gregg got me. Throwed me into the shaft. Reckon I'm done for. Both legs broke. Rib caved in. Tell Smoke—

The writing trailed off into meaningless lines. But it was enough. Traced with the lead of a bullet, upon a tattered piece of paper, it

carried the evidence of a murder—a message that might well seal Bull Gregg's death warrant.

Smoke rose, his face a savage mask. Through thin lips, he spoke slowly and solemnly.

"Bull Gregg killed yuh, Dad! Not a clean, quick death by bullet—but lingerin' and painful! Killed his own dad, too! But he'll pay—pay to the last drop! He'll pay—an' his whole murderin' outfit!"

Slowly he turned on his heel. As he passed Duke Gregg's body, he looked down. His lips moved.

"Yuh was ornery an' mean, Duke Gregg! But yuh was a man, compared with yore son!"

Then he stopped. His breath came sharply. His gaze shot to his father's body, clad in those white chaps. Now down at Duke Gregg with the gaudy calfskin vest.

"It might work!" he grunted. "Worth a try!"

He whirled and sped for the opening of the tunnel. Just beyond, Esteban waited, trembling. Smoke spoke swiftly. The half-breed drew back in deathly terror at the proposal. But as Smoke unfolded the plan, step by step, the youngster nodded reluctantly.

CHAPTER IV

Dead Men Walk

BULL GREGG was as proddy as a wounded grizzly. He, and his whole outfit, had combed the hills and brakes all day—and not a sign of Smoke Saunders. Apparently the wounded puncher had disappeared in thin air.

Dusk was creeping up the slopes toward the peaks, when the huge Gregg and his five hard-bitten followers pulled up at the hitch-rail in front of the Box G house. Bull swung from his horse, and handed the reins to lantern-jawed Link Morton.

He rapped out a harsh order. "Take these broom-tails to the barn, Morton! The rest o' yuh hombres come on in! We hunted thet polecat like a pack of dudes today—but it'll be different tomorrow! I'm givin' each of yuh a job—an' yuh'd better handle it!"

Slender, wolf-faced Sonora Jennison spoke softly, for Bull Gregg's ears alone. "There ees one place we have not look, Bull."

"Huh? Where's thet?" Gregg snapped, as he stepped upon the slab porch.

"The Box G ranch yard an' buildings," Jennison answered evenly.

"The Box G— Blast it all, Sonora, Smoke Saunders wouldn't hole up right here under our noses!"

A mirthless smile flicked across Jennison's narrow face. "You have not stop to theenk, Bull, that we have not seen thees Esteban since Smoke Saunders have escape."

"Meanin' what, h o m b r e?" Bull Gregg's hairy hand lifted the latch as he spoke.

"That Esteban have no love for you, Bull. Eef he should have found Smoke Saunders, he might have breeng heem here. Thees Esteban is not so, what you call eet, dumb."

"Esteban! He might— Blast his addle-colored hide! I'll jerk it off him if'n he did!"

Bull Gregg was inside the main room now, and the others were at his heels. It was dark inside, and the burly ruffian lifted his voice.

"You, Dolores! Where are yuh? Bring a light, blast yuh!"

There was no answer. Bull Gregg roared again—and still nothing but the echoes of his bellowing voice. He stumbled toward the shelf that held the oil lamp, muttering curses. He lifted it down, and felt his way toward the table.

A match flared up and touched the wick. The orange flame sent its dim radiance around the room. Bull Gregg blinked a moment, until his eyes were accustomed to the light. Then a startled oath came from his lips.

For his gaze caught and held upon something there upon the table—something that sent a momentary

shiver up and down his back. He leaned closer to look at it. His slack lips drooped and his piggish eyes went wide.

"Sonora! Come here, hombre!" There was a note of awe, almost fear in Bull Gregg's voice.

Then Sonora Jennison was at his side, and Parr, Dandy Durkin and Skeet Keeler were crowding behind. The half-breed's glittering eyes went down to that strange object. The breath hissed from his throat.

"Eet ees—Duke Gregg's—six-gun! An' those—bullets—seex of them! The writing! What does—eet say?"

Bull Gregg's hand started toward the butt of the heavy, silver inlaid six-gun that lay on the table. Then he drew back. His gaze swept to the six loaded cartridges that were arranged in an even row upon a sheet of paper beside the gun.

HE bent low to read the words, written where the snub noses of the bullets would point to them.

"For Bull Gregg." "For Dandy Durkin." "For Sonora Jennison." "For Brandy Parr." "For Link Morton." "For Skeet Keeler." Bull Gregg's voice was husky as he read.

"But what—what does it mean, Bull?" Parr asked in a shaky voice.

"Blast it, how do I know?" roared Bull Gregg. "Yuh see as plain as I do! Somebody's done—"

"Eet ees no use Bull," Sonora Jennison said unsteadily. "Eet should be in the shaft of the Dirty Dutchman—weeth the body of Duke Gregg!"

"Don't I know thet?" Bull Gregg whirled again toward the kitchen door. His voice cracked, as he called.

"Dolores! Blast it, gal! Where are yuh? Yuh'd better be comin', or I'll—"

"Eet ees no use, Bull," Sonora Jennison said unsteadily. "She ees not here! An' thees gun ees! Ees eet possible that Duke Gregg—"

"The ol' man's dead, right enough! Didn't I—I mean, didn't we see Smoke Saunders pitch him over the rim of the shaft?"

"But the shaft ees fill weeth rocks! Eet ees sealed tight—weeth Duke Gregg eenside! Me, I'm not scare of living man—but eef Duke Gregg's ghos' have come back for revenge hees keeling—"

"Blast it, no ghost done thet!" Bull Gregg roared. "Thet Smoke Saunders is mixed up in it somehow! An' he can't be far away! Yuh said yoreself that mebbe he was holed up on the Box G!"

"But thees gun—" Sonora Jennison's face was white, and his glittering eyes held more than a hint of fear.

"Forget the ghost, Sonora! It's live hombres thet drag six-guns! If Smoke Saunders is close, we'll find him! An' when we do—"

Bull Gregg stopped, and his eyes narrowed. He held up his hand for silence—then leaned forward in an attitude of intent listening. The others followed his example. And then the sound came again—a weird deep groan.

A breathless curse bubbled from Sonora Jennison's lips. The smirking look faded from Dandy Durkin's face, and the first sign of fear took its place. Link Morton shuffled with leaden feet toward the door, until Bull Gregg stopped him with a rasped oath.

Skeet Keeler edged nearer Dandy Durkin, superstitious terror written on his twisted face. Squat Brandy Parr hunched his thick body still lower, and his hands clenched and relaxed as if they were stiffened by cold.

"Eet come—from the—cellar!" Jennison breathed at last.

"It sounded like—the groan Duke Gregg—gave when—the bullet caught him!" Bull Gregg stammered. And no one seemed to notice the near confession that he had uttered.

"Whatever it was, the man that made it is alive!" Dandy Durkin rasped. "Alive—and trapped in the cellar! What are you waiting for?"

Bull Gregg moved stiffly toward the trap door in the corner. His hands hovered over his holsters, and his piggish eyes were glazed with

fear. Sonora Jennison moved softly behind him, and the others came forward on reluctant feet.

Now Bull Gregg stood beside the trap door. He hesitated for an instant. Then he stooped and jerked the door wide. He leaped back, snatching his six-guns from their holsters.

"Come out of it, hombre! Come on up, yore hands high!" he bellowed.

There was no answer. Gregg inched forward and peered down into the darkness. Once more he roared his order. Silence for a breathless second. Then the spine-crinkling groan welled up from the darkness once more.

"Duke Gregg! Duke Gregg's ghos'!" Sonora Jennison's voice was thin and shrill.

The others started back. But this time Bull Gregg did not budge. Perhaps he had less imagination than the rest—or maybe he forced himself to stay put to impress his outfit.

"It ain't no ghost!" he rasped. "It's someone—alive! Someone thet's hurt—bad! Smoke Saunders, or I miss my guess!"

"Eet ees Duke Gregg's—"

"Shet up!" Bull barked. "Get the lamp! We're goin' down there!"

"Yuh—yuh don't need me, boss!" Brandy Parr's voice was pleading.

"We're all goin' down!" Bull Gregg roared.

Now Sonora Jennison was beside the huge ruffian again, the oil lamp in his hand. Bull Gregg gestured toward the trap door.

"You go ahead, Bull. I weel follow weeth the light," Jennison said shakily.

"All right, blast yuh! If'n yuh're scared of yore yaller hide, I'll lead the way."

The big ruffian's heavy feet hit the top step. His staring eyes tried to pierce the darkness outside the radiance of the dim light. Another hesitating step—and another. The other five followed at his heels. Now the last head disappeared below the level of the floor.

The kitchen door opened silently. A slender form streaked across the room on silent feet. A hand lifted the trap door—and let it down softly. The front door swung open a crack. Two more noiseless forms edged through.

But the five men, down in the cellar had eyes only for the gloom ahead—ears only for a repetition of that groan. Bull Gregg took the steps slowly, one at a time. Sonora Jennison's breath came in shallow gasps, as he followed. Then they were upon the level dirt floor.

Not a sound—not a movement. Bull Gregg's voice sounded hollow as he spoke.

"THERE don't—seem to me—no one—"

But now a half-shriek burst from Sonora Jennison's throat. He almost let the lamp fall from his trembling hands. For his eyes had caught something at the far wall—something that put ice-water in his veins.

"Look!" he gasped. "Look! Over there by the wall!"

"What d'yuh mean, hombre?" Then Bull Gregg's eyes caught it.

He stared as if hypnotized. For now the circle of light reached the wall, bringing out those two fearful things in startling distinctness.

"Duke Gregg! An' Jeremiah Saunders!" Bull Gregg's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

And he was right. Apparently standing in an attitude of silent waiting, two forms leaned against the wall. The smaller, with the white angora chaps, seemed to stare at the floor. But the larger, calf-skin vest opened at the neck, stared with unblinking eyes straight at Bull Gregg.

Bull Gregg took a single step forward, propelled against his will. His six-guns dropped to his sides, their weight too heavy for his nerveless hands. His thick lips were slack and bloodless.

"I—I—" He wet his lips. The motionless forms did not answer.

"You're dead!" Sonora Jennison's shrill voice cut the silence. "You're dead! Bull Gregg shot you both! For why do you come back?"

Dandy Durkin, directly behind Jennison, breathed hoarsely. His face was as white as paper. By sheer force of will, he raised his six-gun. It barked sharply. A stab of orange flame streaked past Jennison's ribs, almost scorching him with its blast.

The bullet thudded into flesh. Slowly, stiffly the form of old Duke Gregg toppled forward. For a split second it looked as if he were taking a step toward the five terror-stricken hombres. All but Bull Gregg and Sonora Jennison whirled and pounded up the steps.

Then, as Duke Gregg's body pitched toward them, Bull and Jennison could stand no more. The burly hombre turned so swiftly that he knocked the lamp from Sonora Jennison's hand. In an instant the cellar was in pitch darkness. And now a shrill yell came from squat Brandy Parr.

"The door! It's shet!"

LIKE a maddened bull, Gregg pushed through the five men above him. He shouldered them aside, until his head rapped sharply on the closed trap door. He breathed hoarse, meaningless words of terror, as he bent his back and heaved against the slab.

Suddenly it gave way. Bull Gregg made the last two steps in a wild leap. The others crowded his heels. Link Morton, the last man out of the cellar, kicked the trap door down again. And only then did Bull Gregg notice that another lighted lamp was upon the table.

He stopped, his eyes wide and blank. His slack mouth drooped. Slowly, stiffly, he moved toward the table. His gaze went down. Duke Gregg's six-gun was gone—and so were the six cartridges. Only the sheet of paper with the names was left.

"Who—what—?" The words came in a breathless whisper.

"I—tol' you—you shouldn't have—shot Duke Gregg!" Sonora Jennison's words came thinly through tight lips. "I knew—he would—come back an'—"

"Get 'em high, yuh murderin' lobos!" The barked order came from a dark corner in front of Bull Gregg.

Bull Gregg started back. His piggish eyes strove to pierce the gloom. Then that voice barked again—and not one in the room failed to recognize it as Smoke Saunders'.

"Hist 'em—pronto! Up with 'em—or stop a slug!"

Brandy Parr's hands went high as he scuttled from behind Bull Gregg. Link Morton reached for the rafters, edging from Jennison's side. Skeet Keeler's hands shot upward.

But Sonora Jennison, desperate with terror, streaked for his holsters. His six-gun came out and swung up. It barked—but the bullet plowed into the slabs at his feet, as a stab of orange flame darted from the corner.

A round, black hole appeared like magic squarely between the half-breed's eyes. He teetered for an instant—then pitched forward on his face.

Apparently Bull Gregg felt that death was near. His six-guns still swung at his sides, and now he swept them up, as he threw his body to one side. They belched flame. The bullets thudded into the log wall, exactly where Smoke had been standing. But he was not there now.

"Turn, Bull Gregg! Face yore death like a man!"

His eyes glazed with desperate fear, Bull Gregg whirled toward the sound. Once more his guns swept up. But this time they did not bellow their message of death. For Smoke's right six-gun barked flatly. The bullet caught the huge ruffian in his thick chest.

It smashed him backward like the blow of a club. A half scream of agony and fear bubbled from his lips. Slowly he went down, his clawing hands grasping for the table. And now Dandy Durkin had seen enough. His hands shot up as if they were on springs.

Then Smoke Saunders stepped into the circle of light. His eyes fairly blazed, as they swept the cowed four. A twisted, mirthless grin flicked across his face.

"Come on out, Esteban! Gather up their smoke-poles! They won't have no more use for 'em!"

The half-breed boy glided out of the darkness. With swift precision, he disarmed the cowering men, tossing the guns into a corner.

"An' now cut yoreself some lengths of rope, feller! Reckon these here polecats'll keep better, tied up!"

When Parr, Morton, Durkin and Keeler were securely bound, Esteban slipped from the room. In a moment he returned, Dolores at his side. With wide eyes and white face, she looked down at dead Bull Greeg and Sonora Jennison. Then, as she turned and saw Dandy Durkin, a look of contempt swept over her face.

Now Smoke Saunders stood beside her. His voice was low and even. "Esteban has told yuh the Box G is yores, Miss. Reckon yuh'll have no trouble claimin' it, now thet Bull Gregg an' Sonora Jennison are out of the way!"

"I owe much to you, Smoke Saunders," the lovely girl said softly. "I had begun to fear that—"

"No need to fear now, Miss Dolores. If it's Dandy Durkin yuh're thinkin' of, he's due to spend a good long stretch in prison—him an' the rest of this outfit."

"An' you, *Senor* Smoke," Esteban asked. "Mus' you go back to the *juzgado*—the jail?"

Smoke shook his head. "Reckon the bullet we got from Duke Gregg's body, an' what yuh an' Miss Dolores heard from Bull Gregg's lips'll clear me."

Then his smoky eyes misted. "Reckon, too, thet Duke Gregg an' —an' my Dad'll be glad to sleep in honest graves, instead of in the shaft of the Dirty Dutchman."

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A GOOD GUIDE TO GOOD WHISKEY

Bunched

An Action Novelette of Six-Gun Justice

CHAPTER I

Dry-gulching Party

THE bearded blond giant said, "How is she now?"

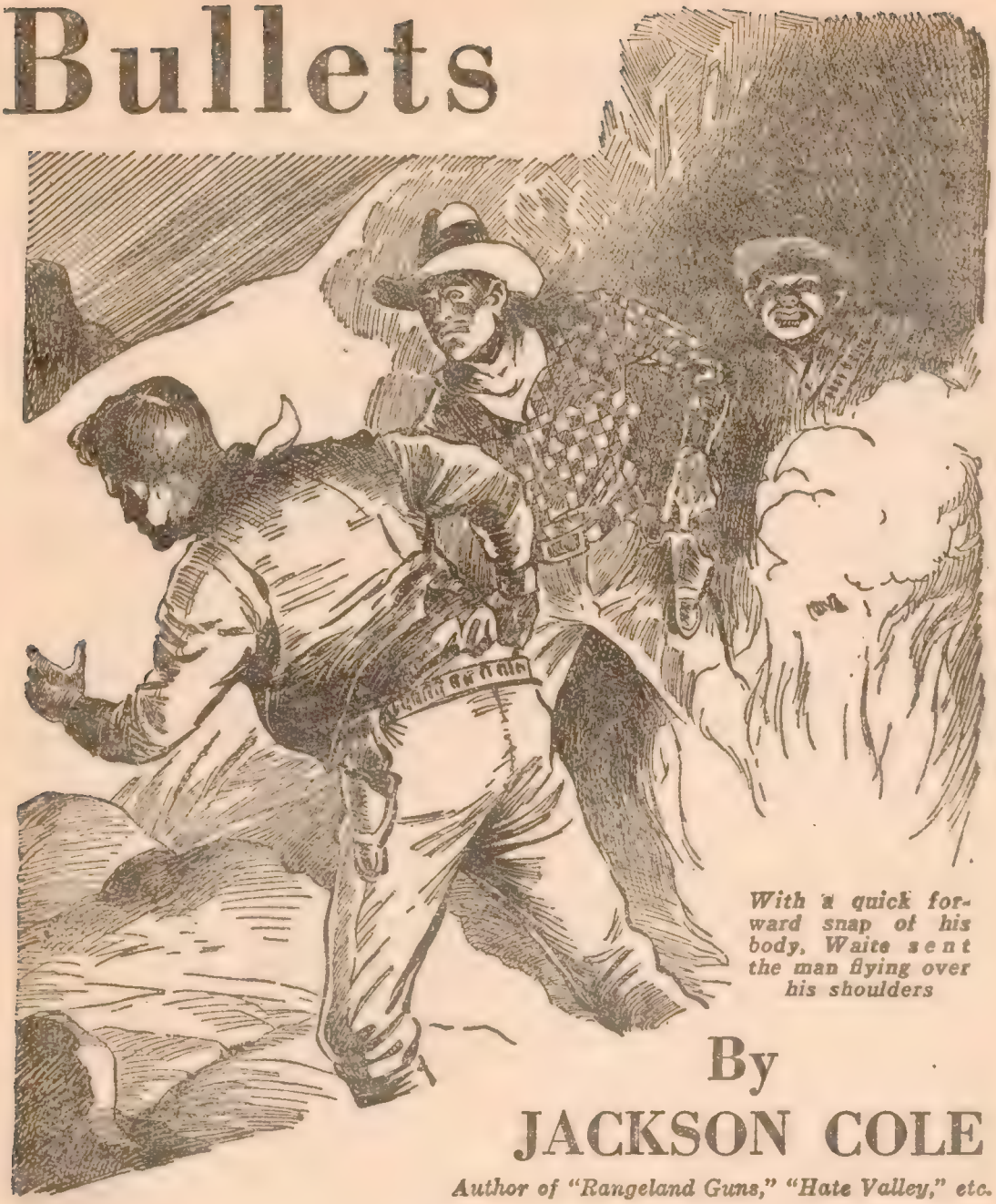
The man lying prone on the huge flat rock gently moved the barrel of his rifle a half-inch to the left. He looked through the sights, then edged the barrel right a bit, as if operating some delicate instrument which required hair's breadth adjustment.

"Reckon that'll do it," he grunted at length.

"It'd better," warned the third man, kneeling to the left of the giant. "A thousand dollars is a lot

Waite, on the Trail, Lets Loose .45-Caliber

Bullets



With a quick forward snap of his body, Waite sent the man flying over his shoulders

By
JACKSON COLE

Author of "Rangeland Guns," "Hate Valley," etc.

of money fer a trigger pull. Make shore yuh pull it right."

Seventy-five yards below and to the right, a mountain trail curved sharply. A narrow trail. Smooth granite wall on one side. A fifty-foot precipice, with water gurgling somewhere below, on the other.

The men on the rock now heard the faint and rhythmic beat of approaching hoofs. The rifleman placed his cheek to the butt of his weapon, squinted one eye, curled his forefinger about the trigger. He waited grimly. The men behind him were figures of stone.

So did the little jackrabbit on the trail below also try to simulate one

Death to Blast a Killer's Scheme to Hell

of the stones strewing the trail. It had heard the hoofbeats much before the men did. Ears back, absolutely motionless, it now froze between two grey boulders.

Jack Waite, slouching easily in the saddle, came closer and closer to the bend in the trail—to the swift death awaiting him there. Engrossed in his thoughts, he gave his rangy roan its head. The setting sun behind him painted scarlet and gold the western horizon.

The rifleman's right biceps and shoulder stiffened when he saw the roan's nose come around the bend. Another three seconds—

But it was the little jackrabbit which made the first move. Made it when the ironshod hoof of the roan's left foreleg was on its way down to crush it. It bolted like a grey streak from between the two boulders. The roan shied violently, almost jerking Waite out of the saddle. And in that split-instant the rifleman had squeezed the trigger.

Crack! Cliffs caught the sharp report, echoed it. But the roan had jerked Waite out of the bullet's path. The leaden pellet whistled harmlessly over his left shoulder—and ripped an ugly red welt in the roan's hip.

The horse's first wild plunge was almost catlike. It landed stiff-legged eight feet farther down the trail—just as the second spurt of flame came from the rifle. Then, the bit between its teeth, its eyes rolling with pain and terror, it plunged madly down the trail.

So quickly had it happened, Jack Waite didn't even have a chance to reach for his six-gun. And ten seconds later, it was unnecessary—in defense, anyway. The maddened horse's bulletlike progress carried him out of range beyond another sharp twist in the trail.

How they managed to make that half-mile whirlwind descent without breaking their necks was a mystery to Waite when he finally brought the horse to a quivering stop. He leaned back, examined the welt on the roan's hip. The bullet had merely nicked the hide there.

Through slitted eyes, he looked back up the trail. No sense going back there now, much as he was tempted. It'd only give the skunks another chance to pump a bullet in him. And Waite knew who was behind that dry-gulching party.

"Red" Keller, whose cabin was close to the spot from which those shots had come, posed as a nester. Waite knew better. Knew that the dust of the Border had been more than once on Keller's clothes. And the clothes of the three-four hombres usually loafing about his cabin. Dust got by driving across cattle the ownership of which Keller might've found right embarrassing to explain.

Yet Keller had no reason to benefit personally by Waite's death. Someone had made it worth his while to reduce the population of Texas by one. Someone whom Waite meant to confront—have the final showdown with—within the next hour or so. There was a hard twist to his mouth as he touched his spurs to the roan's flanks. The final showdown!

Night was casting its somber shadows when Jack Waite rode up to the Bar X ranchhouse. He dismounted, ran up the four steps to the veranda, and a moment later strode into the huge living room.

Mrs. Ryan, Kurt Dalton's grey-haired, fussy housekeeper, frowned disapprovingly when Waite failed to wipe his boots on the mat inside the door.

"For seven years," she said shrilly, "I've been remindin' you to—"

Waite cut her short with an impatient gesture.

"Where's Kurt?"

"Lookin' at that blamed new horse corral o' his ag'in."

"And Conroy?"

"Wall, he was here a couple hours ago, a-workin' on his books. Then he rode off somewhere."

"I reckon I'll wait fer him," Jack said grimly.

THERE was a certain expression now in Waite's eyes which prevented the woman from asking questions. She left the room just as footsteps echoed on the veranda out-

side. The man who entered did not see Waite, standing quietly at the left wall. A black frown on his face, he crossed to the massive old safe in one corner, stooped over the dial. And then Waite said softly:

"Yuh look kind of upset, Conroy. Mad about somethin'?"

Steve Conroy whirled from the safe. He was as big as Waite, but soft, flabby. Dissipation had left its marks on his darkly handsome face.

"Suppose I am," he replied surlily. "What of it?"

"Well," Waite murmured, his eyes belying the mildness of his voice, "yuh shore can't blame that jasper with the rifle. *He* didn't know a jackrabbit would come a-poppin' below my horse jest as he pulled that trigger."

Conroy's left eyelid began twitching nervously.

"What the devil are yuh talkin' about?"

"That yuh had a dry-gulchin' party waitin' fer me when I rode back from town," Waite said coldly. "Keller and his bunch o' coyotes."

"Yuh're crazy!" Conroy snapped. "Why should I do that?"

"Yuh overheard Jeff Marlow—the cashier at the town bank—tell me at the Rainbow bar that yuh deposited eleven hundred dollars fer Dalton this morning."

"Hobson paid me that for those yearlings yuh drove t' his spread," Conroy said quickly. "An' Dalton ordered me to deposit the money—"

"Hobson," Waite interrupted very curtly, "paid yuh *fourteen* hundred dollars. Yuh heard me tell Jeff Marlow that—not knowin' yuh was in back o' me. That's why, yuh thievin' skunk, yuh had those coyotes try t' dry-gulch me on my way back to th' ranch. Because I kin *prove* to Dalton now that yuh're a crook!"

"Damn you, Waite, I'll—"

"Let's see yore ledger," Waite interrupted quietly. "If that Hobson sale is recorded for eleven hundred—which I know damn well it is—I reckon yore best bet is to fork a pony and start a-travelin'."

Conroy's black eyes glittered like those of an angry snake.

"Listen, Waite!" he panted. "Dalton made me his ranch manager. Yuh're only the foreman here, in charge of the cowhands. It's none o' yore business how the ranch records 're kept."

The smile on Waite's lips wasn't pleasant as he leisurely approached Conroy.

"The ledger!" he said softly.

"Go to the devil!" Conroy snarled.

Waite's big hands jerked out. They caught Conroy's shoulders, swung him around, sent him spinning into the wall. Contemptuously, he turned his back on him, stooped over the safe. He twirled the dial—left, right, left, back to zero.

He was pressing down the safe handle, about to pull the massive door open, when a scream jerked him erect. The scream of a child—high-pitched, semi-hysterical.

"Jack! Look out!"

Waite jerked his head left to the stairs. Kurt Dalton's nine-year-old little niece stood there. Her left hand clutched her nightshirt at the throat. Her right pointed to where he'd left Conroy. There was terror on her face, in her eyes.

He swung around—just as a shot crashed out. The bullet chipped the plaster in the wall an inch from his head, sent sharp little particles of it flying into his right cheek. Conroy, in a half-crouch, his face twisted with fury, held a smoking Colt.

"Yuh'll see that ledger—in hell!" he said hoarsely.

CHAPTER II

Pardners

WAITE had no time to reach for his gun. Conroy's forefinger was whitening for the second shot—when the big puncher hurled himself forward. Threw himself in a long, blind tackle, his spine crawling as he anticipated the burning impact of lead plowing through his body.

The Colt cracked viciously as Waite's right shoulder slammed Conroy above the knees. With incredible

lightness, the bullet touched his left sleeve. Gunpowder singed his shirt. And then both crashed to the floor.

Cursing, Conroy slashed at Waite's head with the heavy blue barrel. And then steel fingers caught his gun wrist, arrested the blow.

"Run upstairs, Judy!" Waite shouted to the little girl still on the stairs. "Quick!"

He breathed a sigh of relief when she obeyed. Conroy was still trying to jerk his wrist free, his body writhing like that of a wounded snake, when Waite reared up to a kneeling position. A sharp, downward twist of those steel fingers—and a scream burst from Conroy's lips. He dropped the revolver.

"Yuh lowdown skunk!" Waite forced through clenched teeth.

He got to his feet, reached down swiftly. His left hand closed on Conroy's shirt. Jerked him erect. Conroy was whimpering something, his eyes rolling with terror, when Waite slashed around with the flat of his right palm.

A SHARP *crack*—and Conroy went staggering back. He crashed into the wall, slid along it to the floor. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

And then a harsh voice rasped behind Waite: "What the devil's goin' on here?"

Kurt Dalton stood in the doorway leading from the veranda. He was a burly, red-faced old man, with a reputation for a hellish temper which extended far beyond the Bar X boundaries. His little blue eyes were darting from Conroy on the floor to Jack Waite's set, grim face.

"Well," he roared, "I asked what's goin' on here?"

Conroy lifted himself up on one elbow.

"Waite's still trying to horn in on my job, Kurt," he said quickly. "He barged in and asked to be shown the ledgers. When I refused, he slugged me and went to the safe."

Dalton swung around to Waite. There was a dangerous glint in the old man's eyes.

"That right, Jack? Yuh came in demandin' to see the ledgers?"

"Well," said Waite, "it's kind of takin' a short-cut to what happened here. Yeah, I asked this son-in-law o' yore'n to show me how he recorded the sale to Lem Hobson."

"Why?" Dalton snapped. "That any o' yore business?"

Waite's eyes narrowed. "I rec'lect a time," he said evenly, "when yuh sort o' welcomed me bein' plumb concerned about Bar X affairs. Anyway, I've proof that Steve Conroy is a crook."

Dalton's beefy face went a shade redder.

"An' I've better proof that yuh're lyin'," he said furiously.

Waite stared at the old man. "What d'yuh mean?"

"Agnes had married him," Dalton shouted. "Agnes loved him. She died in his arms. Yuh goin' to tell me that my daughter would marry a crook? I may be gettin' old, but I ain't weak in the head yet. Yuh're jealous of Conroy's authority. *You* want to be the boss man around here. That's why yuh're tryin' to poison my mind agin' him."

"Kurt!"

"Yeah!" The old man was now shaking a gnarled fist under Waite's nose. "I wouldn't be s'prised if yuh framed somethin' on them ledgers. Jest so that I might fire him. Which is a back-stabbin', greaser way of doin' things. Now get the devil outa here! An' if yuh come skulkin' around with more complaints 'bout Steve, I'll kick yuh off my property!"

Waite's lips were white now—white with anger.

"Yuh old fool!" he said softly. "Yuh blind old fool. I'm jealous o' Steve, eh? After all these years, y' tell *me*—" The words choked in his throat. He controlled himself, added with a crooked smile: "I reckon I *have* another complaint to make. The smell o' skunk is plumb annoyin' to me. An' I'll be smellin' it so long as Steve Conroy's around the Bar X. So—I quit!"

He was about to swing into saddle when a voice hailed him. Little Judy

Dalton, still wearing her nightshirt and shivering in the cold night air, was waving frantically from the small open rear porch.

Waite ran toward her, swept her up in his arms.

"Yuh'll catch cold, honey," he said reproachfully.

The little girl's arms encircled Waite's neck. Her piquant oval face was wet with tears.

"I heard you tell them you're going away, Jack," she wailed. "Take me with you. You always said we were—partners."

Waite gently smoothed back the unruly golden curls.

"Shore we're partners, honey. But yuh can't leave yore Uncle Kurt. Yuh're all he's got."

"I want to go with you," Judy insisted. "Look! I'll sell my little gold locket, and we'll buy another ranch and—oh, *please,* let me go with you, Jack!"

EAGERLY, she brought forth the heart-shaped locket dangling from a long, thin chain around her throat. Waite kissed the moist cheek, walked to the rear door.

"Go back to bed—partner. I'm ridin' to town now. I'll mail yuh a box of that candy yuh like so much."

"I don't want any candy!" she said fiercely—and Waite felt like a fool. "I'm going with you."

He shook his head, deposited her inside the door, turned jerkily and ran to his horse. Leaving little Judy behind was like turning another knife in his heart. Waite had himself built her first play pen when the orphaned infant came to the Bar X. Watched her grow through the years that followed. Taught her to ride. He was her pal and hero.

The roan shied again at the unaccustomed roughness of Waite's spurs digging into its flanks. Entering the trail to town, Waite's eyes were as hard as the granite wall on his left.

Five minutes later, he could not resist the temptation to rein in, look back over his shoulder. From that point in the trail, he could see clearly the Bar X spread nestling in the valley below—the rambling old ranchhouse, outbuildings, the corrals, the bunkhouse, the miles of verdant grazing country. Justly enough it was considered one of the finest ranches in the Southwest.

Yet nine years ago it had been just a strip of land which Kurt Dalton had inherited from his brother, Judy's father. A strip of land, and two hundred dollars—that was the seed from which the Bar X Ranch had grown.

Dalton didn't know much about ranching. Jack Waite did. He was the first puncher on the Bar X payroll. Only there hadn't been any payroll then.

The two of them had worked side by side, building up the ranch. Slowly, slowly. Through those first few black years when guns flamed in the valley. When it had been infested with Border riff-raff. When Waite would often spend as many as twenty hours in the saddle, guarding their small herd. Three bullet holes on his rangy body were permanent reminders of those days.

Now the Bar X lay there, bathed by the white moonlight. Eighteen punchers drawing pay. Thousands of head of cattle. All mortgage notes paid off. But Kurt Dalton seemed to have forgotten how much he, Waite, had contributed to making it what it was today.

No, Dalton would rather listen to a thieving skunk like Steve Conroy, who came there a year ago with Dalton's daughter, Agnes. The girl died shortly afterward. But Dalton accepted blindly her enthusiastic recommendation of her husband, made Conroy his ranch manager. *His* daughter couldn't misjudge character! Whereupon Conroy promptly began bleeding the ranch.

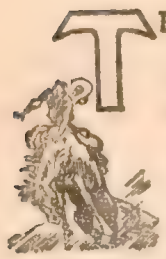
An ungrateful, blind old fool, a glib-tongued crook — the devil with both of them! It *was* too bad one couldn't reel back nine years of his life—the years he had given the Bar X.

He shrugged, touched the roan's flanks with his stirrups.

"Come on, Bob! There's plenty of red-eye in town that I'd plumb enjoy guzzlin' now. An' tomorrow we'll start a-lookin' fer a new job."

CHAPTER III

The Locket



THE roan's abrupt nervousness jerked Waite out of his bitter thoughts a half-hour later.

"What's the matter, boy?" he asked softly.

Then he understood. They were now rounding the bend in the trail where he had come so close to getting a bullet through his heart earlier in the evening. The horse remembered the spot.

Waite's eyes were wary, suspicious as the nervous animal rounded the bend. Twenty feet ahead was a break in the wall. A steep path wound left from there to Red Keller's cabin, nestling on a kind of plateau two hundred yards above.

He looked for lights of the cabin, which he should be able to see from this point. There were none. The gang had probably gone into town. He cursed them softly, rode on. And then when he passed the path, he suddenly heard the whinnying of a horse.

Waite's right hand jerked to his six-gun, yanked it out. Instinctively, he crouched lower in the saddle. Horse—or horses—in that path. No lights in the cabin. Where could the riders be—if not on back of their mounts? They wouldn't sit in darkness up in the cabin there.

Another trap? Another murderous rifle leveled at him from those concealed horsemen?

Expecting any second to see gunshots streak the night, Waite jabbed his spurs into the roan. The horse leaped ahead. It was only after it had rounded another twist in the trail that he checked it to a walk again.

To return and investigate that mysterious whinnying horse tempted Waite—and his better judgment forced him to reject the thought. If Keller and his henchmen waited there in the darkness, ready to set out on some midnight deviltry, investigation would bring a swift bullet. The devil with them! He rode on.

Yet an ugly premonition now rode with him. Something very sinister about those concealed riders—which, he was certain, the whinnying of that horse betrayed. He could not shake off the feeling that hell was brewing — somewhere. Hell which would involve him before the night was over.

Twice he reined in sharply, swung about in the saddle, his hand dropping to the butt of his gun. He thought he had heard faint hoofbeats behind him. But only the night silence mocked him each time he jerked the roan to a stop.

He was cursing his nerves when he finally rode into Farragut, a bleak little cattletown. Past midnight now, the town's sole crooked street was deserted.

Waite swung out of the saddle before the livery stable, rapped his fist on the door. Lem Furman, the wizened little proprietor, usually slept on a cot inside the stable. He waited a few seconds, rapped again. No replying footsteps came to the door.

"Drunk, I reckon," Waite muttered. "Mebbe I kin git him up later."

Securing the roan's bridle to a hitching-post, he rolled himself a brown cigarette. Puffed on it a while, still hoping that Furman might come to the door. Then he shrugged, pulled his Stetson lower over his eyes, and stepped out into the street. The Rainbow Saloon was perhaps a quarter mile to the right.

He hadn't taken a dozen steps when he suddenly realized that he was being followed. He had seen that black shadow detach itself from a doorway across the street. And his ears, already prepared and straining for the sound, caught it almost instantly — the *pat-pat* of stealthy, guarded footsteps behind him. Im-

possible completely to muffle them in the dead silence of the night.

He took a deep drag on his cigarette, flipped it away, the glowing tip creating a tiny meteor as it curved through the darkness. Deliberately, he controlled the impulse to look back over his shoulder. Let the furtive coyote believe he got away with it—until Waite was ready to step on him!

Ahead and on his left, loomed the squat, sprawling outlines of the post office and general store. The street curved sharply there. His thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, his pace still carelessly unhurried, Waite rounded the bend. Then he sidestepped to the wall, swung around. His big body in a half-crouch, he waited grimly.

FOR perhaps ten seconds longer, he continued to hear those footsteps. Then they ceased abruptly. A thin smile curved his lips. The other had paused because he no longer heard the footsteps of the man he was trailing. Was probably crouching in the darkness there, guessing, wondering.

Now Waite heard again the man's guarded progress. Heard it so faintly that at first he had attributed it to his imagination. A second later, however, he was certain. The other was approaching—with the stealthy silence of a stalking jungle cat.

He pressed his back against the wall when a shadow slid across a moon-bathed patch ahead of him. The other was just around the angle of the wall. Waite could even hear the soft rustling sound as the man's shoulder slid along the rough pine boards.

Crouching lower, he gently eased his gun out of the holster. His nostrils dilated, and there was a tingling feeling at his fingertips. He'd hunted the grizzly and the mountain lion in their rocky lairs, but it was a novel sensation to be stalked himself—and by an enemy infinitely more dangerous.

An arm came around the wall, and moonlight glinted on blue steel. Then he saw a battered, braided *sombrero*, a squat figure.

Waite's Colt barrel slashed downward. A grunt of pain escaped the man as it smashed across his gun wrist. His right shoulder sagged abruptly. The revolver thudded to the wooden sidewalk.

"I know," said Waite, his voice cool, unhurried. "There's the gun in yore left holster. Goin' to pull it?"

"No, *amigo*," came the soft reply. "I think I bettaire not."

A Mexican—and when he stood up, careful to keep his hands shoulder-high, Waite had his first good look at him. A hard-faced devil! Handsome, swarthy face, marred by a white scar which bisected the left cheek from the eye to the corner of his mouth. A muscular, squat body. His eyes and mouth were as cruel as his spurs, supporting rowels fully an inch in diameter, points filed to needlelike sharpness.

"All right, hombre," Waite said, "start talkin'. We're makin' a trip now to the sheriff's office where you'll have a chanct t' do some fast explainin'."

The Mexican smiled, showing his white teeth.

"I don' t'ink you want to take me to the shereeff, *senor*. No, I don' t'ink so."

Waite's eyes narrowed. The man was curiously confident. A certain disturbing sureness in the easy slouch of his body, in his smile. Had he some trick up his sleeve? Or was he simply stalling for time? Awaiting an opportunity to make a grab for his other gun?

With slow deliberation, the Mexican's hands went to his throat, then separated, slid to the back of his neck, began fumbling with something there. A moment later his left hand extended stiffly toward Waite. The twin ends of a fine gold chain were pinched between his thumb and forefinger—a chain supporting a tiny, heart-shaped gold locket. Judy Dalton's locket! And he had seen it, less than two hours ago, around the little girl's neck!

CHAPTER IV

Ransom Note

JACK WAITE dropped the guns in his hands. The Mexican did not twitch a muscle as Waite's big body lunged in, as his hands closed on Ramirez' brown throat. The slitted grey eyes were inches from the black eyes of the Mexican. Murder in the former; insolent defiance in the latter.

Ramirez knew he held the upper hand. Knew the fingers at his throat wouldn't dare to kill. Even as Waite realized it a moment later. Breathing heavily, he dropped his arms, stepped back.

"All right, hombre," he said harshly, "I call yore hand. Yuh knew I'd recognize that locket. How?"

"There is no time for talk, *senor*," the Mexican snapped. "You ride weeth me?"

"Ride—where?"

"*Dios,* but to where we keep the leetle *senorita.* If I don' breeng you there soon, she die. And that's the truth, *senor.*"

"We ride," Waite said curtly.

The Mexican grinned again. There was relief on his swarthy face. He stooped, picked up his other gun, jammed it back into his holster.

"Go back to your horse. When I pass, you follow."

Turning, he disappeared into the shadows.

Waite picked up his gun, returned swiftly to the livery stable. He was just swinging into saddle, when hoof-beats pounded down the street. The Mexican, mounted on a magnificent black stallion, shot by a few seconds later.

Swinging after him, Waite had to let his rangy roan out until its belly was almost to the ground before he could catch up to the flying stallion. The Mexican led a breakneck pace down the mountain trail.

The rush of wind past his face cleared Waite's head. He was able to think now beyond the simple and stunning fact that the Mexican gunman had in his possession Judy Dalton's locket. Which meant that she'd been kidnaped. How else could the Mexican gunman gain possession of it?

And then a dozen other questions clamored in Waite's mind. How *could* Judy have been kidnaped? Dalton in the ranchhouse. The huge bunkhouse only a hundred yards away—and eighteen men sharing it. Men who would have literally torn apart anyone intending harm to the girl.

And even if the outlaws somehow managed to kidnap her, why did they want *him?* They knew he was riding into town—for Ramirez had obviously been waiting for him across from the livery stable. Judy herself told them? Of course, the Mexican *could* have taken the lower trail at the fork halfway between the Bar X and town. Riding hell-for-leather, he could have easily reached the town ahead of him. Yet—

Waite shrugged. He'd know the answers soon enough.

They pounded on, Waite maintaining the roan's nose a few feet behind the black's tail. Leaving the ridge, Ramirez swung his horse sharply to the right. Waite nodded grimly. He knew the hellish country ahead.

It was a nine-mile stretch of desert—beyond it, the Rio Grande border. Many an outlaw had found refuge in this desolate, uninhabited strip, criss-crossed with a myriad of humplike ridges, canyons, gulches. Just lost himself in this maze of incredibly rough country.

Of course they'd bring the girl here. Hide her in some gulch—and laugh at pursuit.

They were moving now in a cloud of fine alkaline dust swirled up by their horses' hoofs. Ever-shifting dust, which would completely obliterate all tracks an hour after they had been made. Something else which made pursuit so difficult. Aptly enough had this strip been called the outlaws' paradise.

In thirty minutes, lather began coating Waite's horse. His eyes were bloodshot and smarting from the dust when Ramirez reined in suddenly. He pointed to a V-like cleft between two huge cliffs — a cleft just wide enough to permit the passage of a man on horseback.

"You go first, *senor!*"

Waite touched the heaving flanks of his roan and rode through the cleft. He found himself in a twisting, narrow passageway, flanked on either side by smooth walls of granite. It was an entrance a few men behind barricades could hold off against a small army. A perfect outlaws' nest!

It was pitch black between the granite walls. Ahead somewhere, Waite could see a peculiar faint reddish glow. He gave the horse its head. And now he heard behind him the Mexican's stallion also entering the passageway.

He rounded a sharp bend — and then suddenly understood the cause of that reddish glow. A huge fire burned in the center of the natural little rocky bowl. Black and menacing were the several figures outlined against the leaping flames. Two held rifles, barrels now trained on Waite's chest. Two other men brandished six-guns.

And as Waite appraised coolly the silent, grim quartet, waiting for someone to command his next move, a fifth man sneaked up behind him. Waite's first knowledge of him was a tug at his holster as the man jerked out his Colt.

He turned leisurely — and then froze in the saddle. The man standing two feet away from him, a murderous glitter in his black eyes, was Steve Conroy!

For perhaps thirty seconds, the grim tableau remained so. Waite glanced coolly at the quartet near the fire. Now he recognized the bearded blond giant on the left—Red Keller!

Well, he had the answer now—and it was simple enough. Conroy stole Judy's locket when she was asleep. He gave it to Ramirez, had the Mexican take the lower trail and get into town ahead of Waite. If Ramirez could bring him back at the point of his gun—fine; that failing, the locket was sure to do the trick. Conroy knew how crazy he was about Judy.

"Dismount!" Conroy commanded. And added, when Waite swung out of saddle, "Walk to that big boulder on the left there."

Waite obeyed coolly. What deviltry was next? The huge white boulder resembled the hump of a whale. He walked steadily toward it. Six feet from it, he stopped in his tracks, his face greying beneath the bronze, his big fists clenching slowly.

A body lay beyond that boulder. The still, thin body of a little girl. Her face was ghastly white in the flickering light of the fire. Blood crimsoned the golden curls over her left temple. Judy Dalton!

WAITE swung around. His face was a granite mask. Only his eyes seemed alive—and they glittered with maniacal fury. For the first time in his life Waite wanted to kill—with his bare hands. Kill, kill, kill! His blood pounded that message in his temples.

"Yuh skunks!" he panted.

He leaped in. Leaped in though five guns were staring at him. Waite didn't give a damn. He felt that those bullets couldn't stop him. Not until he reached Conroy's throat. Then, though dead, his fingers would go on squeezing, squeezing—

The first man between himself and Conroy was Red Keller. At Conroy's screaming command, "Alive! Take him alive!" the giant reversed his rifle. The heavy iron-shod butt slashed at Waite's head.

Waite jerked his head two inches to the right. As the rifle butt swished by, his right fist crashed out. It caught the giant square in the mouth. Pulped his thick lips. Drove half of his yellow teeth back into his throat. Snapped his head back until Waite could see the thick throat behind that dirty blond beard.

The knuckles of Waite's left hand

smashed into that throat. Keller dropped as if he'd just received a bullet through his heart. The bow-legged, squat outlaw charging Waite from the left tripped over the giant's body. But it wasn't the ground that he hit first. Waite's knee rammed the man below the chin as he was still falling. The outlaw was unconscious even before he struck the granite floor of the bowl.

But it gave the third man a chance to close in. To hurl himself on Waite's broad back. A muscular arm hooked about his neck, tightened. Tightened against the leverage of the man's knee in the small of Waite's back. Almost instantly it shut off his breath. And the man's free right fist was pounding, pounding at Waite's head.

Desperately, Waite swung around so that his back was to the fire. He took two quick steps backward. A moment later, he heard a howl of agony behind him. The man on his back was now almost directly over the tongues of flame leaping up from the burning logs.

THE pressure on his throat relaxed. With a quick forward snap of his body, Waite sent the man flying over his shoulders. He leaped over him, continued in his grim progress toward Conroy, now crouching against the wall.

Three strides brought him within as many feet of Conroy. He knew the cringing man was about to shoot. But he had gained his objective. In another second, though hot lead may be plowing through his body, his hands would be on Conroy's throat. It was all Waite wanted.

And then the noose of a leather *riata*, seemingly given life of its own by the supple wrist which threw it, swiftly settled about Waite's shoulders. Hoofs pounded on the rocks even as Waite desperately tried to throw up his arms, to slide off that deadly loop.

There was little slack in the *riata*, its other end secured to Ramirez' saddle pummel, when the Mexican had dug his murderous rowels into the stallion's flanks.

The horse's wild lunge jerked Waite off his feet. Sent him hurtling through space. He struck the granite floor of the bowl fully a dozen feet from where he'd been lifted. Struck it with a jar which knocked all breath out of his body. Which sent the black nausea of unconsciousness sweeping through him.

Conroy's face was a vague blur as it poised for a second over him. He knew that Conroy now slapped him hard across the face, but he felt no pain. Just a dull jar as the back of his head recoiled against the rock beneath him.

"Yuh hurt?" he heard Conroy shouting. "Yuh hurt, damn yuh?"

It was the wild concern in Conroy's voice more than the repeated slapping which cleared Waite's head. He tried to sit up, managed to lift himself up to one elbow.

"Well, yore back didn't crack, anyway," Conroy snarled. "Then I'd have had to kill the kid. Yes, she's alive, yuh fool! Had been knocked out when she fell off her pony. Chloroform kept her unconscious."

"What the hell are yuh tryin' to do?" Waite asked hoarsely.

"Frame yuh for her kidnapin'. Get up! Yuh're writing a ransom note to Dalton. An' I warn yuh right now—make another break fer it, and she gets a bullet through her."

Waite was staring at him now.

"Yuh think—" he said slowly. "By God, are yuh loco enough to think Dalton will believe I kidnaped her?"

Conroy nodded.

"He will."

"Yuh're plumb out o' yore head. Don't Judy know who brought her here?"

There was a triumphant glitter in Conroy's black eyes.

"That's jest it, Waite—she doesn't. All she knows is that her pony tripped on the trail there. Ramirez did a clever trick o' ropin'."

"The trail!" Waite said sharply. "What was she doing on it?"

"Trying to catch up with yuh. Ten minutes after yuh left, I passed

her room. Her door was open. She wasn't in bed. And pinned to her pillow was a note—saying that she didn't want to stay on the ranch without yuh. Admitted she was riding after yuh.

"Keller and his men were waitin' fer new instructions from me on the path to his cabin. Yes, they saw you ride by. And the girl, ten minutes later. Ramirez roped her pony. The fall knocked her out. Holding her for ransom was his bright idea. Having *you* framed fer it was mine, when I got there shortly afterward."

"And how," Waite asked coldly, "do yuh plan to do that?"

Conroy handed him a penciled note.

"Yuh're makin' a copy of it in yore handwritin', and I'll send a man with it to Dalton."

Waite unfolded the note. He read:

Dalton: I ain't arguing if it's right or wrong to do what I did. I know you owe me a damn sight more for building up the Bar X to what it is today than just a month's pay I still have coming from you. There's five thousand dollars in your safe which you are holding to pay Indian Joe when he delivers these horses. I want that money to make a new start in Mexico, and I have a way of prying it even from an old skinflint like you. I'm holding Judy. You take that money and go along with the men who brings you this—and you'll get her back. Try any tricks—and you'll never see her again.

Jack Waite.

Waite looked up.

"He'll bring the money," he said quietly. "Then what?"

A mocking smile on his lips, Conroy explained, quickly, succinctly. When Walton rode through the passageway, he'd see Waite standing near the fire, and Ramirez on horseback, overlooking the boulder behind which the girl was. The rest of them would be hiding behind other huge boulders strewing the floor of the bowl.

Of course, Dalton wouldn't know that the gun in Waite's hand would be empty. That Ramirez had orders to kill the girl at the first suspicious move Waite made. Waite was to make two moves—and two only: to take the money from Dalton, then motion him to take Judy and beat it.

Any deviation from those orders meant, first, instant murder of the little girl by Ramirez. And then both Waite and Dalton would be burned down.

"Still think there'd be any doubts in Kurt Walton's mind?" Conroy concluded grimly.

Waite appraised him quietly a few seconds.

"And after Dalton is gone?" Waite asked quietly.

"Yuh'll stop lead!"

"All right," said Waite. "I kin savvy that part of it. But why frame the rest of it? A hell of a lot of trouble fer jest five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand, hell!" Conroy said savagely. "Dalton willed half the ranch to yuh. The other half will go to Judy. Didn't know that, eh?"

"No," Waite replied softly. "No, I didn't. I reckon Dalton ain't goin' to lose any time changin' that will, either."

"Right. With my name goin' in fer yores. Then—why, *then,* Waite, something might sort of happen to Dalton. Get it?" Grinning, he handed Waite a slip of paper, a stubby pencil. "Start copyin' that note."

And as Waite hesitated, glaring up at Conroy, he heard a soft laugh behind him. Ramirez, still astride his black stallion, now had one of his guns trained on the girl.

CHAPTER V

Flaming Lead

CURSING softly, Waite moved to a flat boulder, placed the paper on it, began writing. Ten minutes later, the one outlaw who hadn't been in the whirlwind action when Jack Waite had gone berserk, rode away with the note.

His back now to the boulder, the *riata* no longer about his shoulders,

Waite tried to keep alive a last spark of hope. Red Keller was still unconscious. So was the outlaw Waite had knocked out. It left only Conroy and Ramirez.

Now—if ever—was his last desperate chance to make a break for his life. And Dalton's life, too, for Conroy bluntly admitted he meant to murder the old man once the will was changed. A murder which will result in himself and Judy co-owning the Bar X. It wouldn't take him long to cheat her out of her share. Or, perhaps, something would "happen" to her, too. Conroy wouldn't balk at another murder — if he thought he could get away with her.

Yes, Waite told himself desperately, *now* was the time to try—something. Before the other two men came to, and made the odds against him hopeless.

But there was Ramirez near the fire on his black stallion. The Mexican's gun was still covering the girl. And it tied Waite's hands. He might escape with his own life, but the girl would die.

And so a few more minutes dragged by, while Waite was going mad trying to figure out some way to take care of the Mexican. Conroy didn't worry him much. He was a bad shot and a coward. Ramirez was neither.

HE dragged out his bag of makings, rolled himself a cigarette. There was just enough tobacco left in the little cotton bag. He was about to toss it away, when an idea suddenly flamed through his mind.

"Yes," he told himself fiercely, "it's bound t' work if—"

He rolled over on his left hip, his hand holding the tobacco bag concealed now by his right thigh. A moment later, the fingers of his left hand began wedging cartridges out of his belt. Conroy, sitting on a rock a dozen feet away, saw nothing in Waite's attitude to arouse his suspicions. Nor did the Mexican.

But Waite's fingers were now feverishly stuffing those cartridges into the cotton bag. He counted nine before the bag was full. Drawing tight the strings which closed the mouth of the bag, he sat up again. The cigarette he'd rolled was still dangling between his lips.

"Mind obligin' me with a match, Conroy?" he drawled.

He suspected what Conroy's answer would be—and he wasn't disappointed.

"Yuh'll get your next smoke in hell!"

The Mexican grinned.

"An' if you t'ink this give you excuse, *senor*, to come close to me to the fire—" Still grinning, he gently shook his head.

Waite cursed both of them. Simulating anger, he threw the cigarette into the fire.

"Reckon I ain't got no more use for this, neither," he growled. And tossed the cartridge-stuffed bag into the hissing flames.

His pounding heart timed the next thirty seconds. Then a miniature inferno burst from that fire. Nine cartridges going off simultaneously, the explosion was like the boom of a hand grenade. Nine released leaden pellets sent a pinwheel of sparks and smoldering bits of wood out of the heart of the flames.

And the black stallion went mad—even as Waite knew it would.

Standing only four feet from the fire, the sudden explosion, the flying sparks, instantly transformed it into a rearing, twisting, pawing wild bronc. The Mexican was almost jerked out of his saddle.

And then Waite was on his feet, racing toward him. A scream burst from the Mexican's lips when Waite was only six feet from him. The terror-blind stallion had smashed its side into the wall — and Ramirez hadn't had a chance to slip his foot out of the stirrups. Nine hundred pounds of maddened horseflesh, a granite wall, all the drive of those powerful muscles—and Ramirez' leg cushioning the blow.

The stallion swung away from the wall, even as Waite lunged for the gun still in Ramirez' left holster. A catlike turn, the black's shoulder

caught Waite in the chest. Only a convulsive clutch at the stallion's silky mane saved Waite from being crushed beneath those ironshod hoofs. He hung on with left hand.

Then the stallion reared up on its hind legs. Higher, higher. Until it was standing almost upright, front hoofs pawing the air. Waite let go the mane, hurled himself backward. For in that split second he saw Ramirez swing around with his gun. Already fierce triumph in those cruel black eyes, on the swarthy, pain-twisted face.

Waite was still falling when Ramirez fired. A shot which was almost perfectly synchronized with another—Conroy blazing away. A bullet slammed into Waite's shoulder. Its terrific impact, catching him in mid-air, spun him about. He fell.

And then he was aware of a huge bulk teetering and falling on top of him—the stallion, its head pierced by a slug from Conroy's gun. Waite rolled over convulsively. A body crashed on top of him. But not the stallion's. That of the Mexican.

A screaming Spanish curse—and the barrel of a gun slashed across Waite's forehead. A glancing blow, the sights ripped an ugly gash over his left eye. Blood instantly half-blinded him. His fist smashed into the Mexican's face. Again! Still again! He heard bullets thudding into the stallion's dead body—Conroy firing wildly at both of them. Firing as quickly as he could squeeze the trigger.

The Mexican's head was now lolling to one side. Waite did not know whether he had knocked him out—or whether one of Conroy's bullets had found the wrong target. He squirmed out from beneath him, scooped up one of his black guns. Then he dived headlong over the stallion's body.

A moment later the Colt in his right hand spat flame. Not at Conroy. At Red Keller. The giant had come to. Was on his feet, even then bringing a rifle to his shoulder. Waite's bullet caught him squarely between the eyes. Keller dropped the rifle. Like a tree undercut by a woodsman's ax, he toppled forward, his body stiff until it hit the rocky floor of the bowl.

"In yore tracks, Conroy!" Waite said sharply.

Conroy, running toward the boulder behind which the girl lay, stopped jerkily, swung about.

"Don't, Waite!" he shouted, dropping his gun. "Don't shoot!"

There was craven terror in his bulging eyes.

"Shore!" Waite said contemptuously. "Yuh *know* yuh deserve a slug through yore yellow-streaked carcass."

With a knife from the Mexican's belt, he cut the *riata* into several six-foot strips. Commanding Conroy to lie down, he quickly lashed his wrists and ankles. Then he bound the still unconscious outlaw he had knocked out with his knee.

Ramirez, he discovered a few seconds later, was dead, a bullet-hole below his right ear. Killed by a bullet Conroy had intended for Waite.

Unhooking a water canteen from the Mexican's saddle, Waite began crossing to where Judy Dalton lay. He found that he was staggering now, a nauseating weakness leadening his feet. The flesh wound in his shoulder throbbed dully. And he suddenly realized that the entire left side of his shirt was soaked with blood. Blood also flowed from the cut over his left eye.

He was stooping over the little girl, about to feel her pulse, when a black nausea again swept over him. His knees suddenly buckled.

VOICES jerked him back to consciousness some time later. He stirred, groaned, opened his eyes. And his first instantaneous realization was that little Judy was no longer behind that boulder. Now he identified one of the voices. It was Conroy's, saying tersely:

"Shore, Judy, some bad men tied me up and hurt Jack. Now you jest cut the—"

"Don't, Judy!" Waite said hoarse-

ly, struggling up to a sitting position.

The little girl, stooping with the Mexican's knife over Conroy, straightened quickly. She ran toward him. "Jack!"

And in that instant, Waite heard hoofbeats in the passageway leading into the bowl. The outlaw sent with the note was now returning with Dalton! The outlaw who could still turn the tables on him, once he grasped the situation.

Desperately, Waite struggled to his feet. Gun in hand, he weaved to the passageway, stepped to one side of it—just as a horseman rode through. It was Kurt Dalton!

The bowlegged little outlaw immediately behind Dalton grunted a startled exclamation when he saw the bodies on the floor of the bowl. His right hand instantly dropped to his gun butt—and froze there as another gun barrel jabbed viciously into his back.

"Reach, hombre!" Waite snapped. And added when the outlaw shot up his arms, "Reckon yuh'd better take care o' this skunk, Kurt. I—I kind of feel sick."

Dalton asked two words, his red face grim, set: "Conroy's stunt?"

"Yeah."

The Bar X owner drew his gun and fired three shots into the air.

"To fetch some of our boys, Jack," he explained. "I had 'em trail me. 'Cause I *knew* yuh was forced to write that note."

Waite stared at him.

"Yuh knew?"

"Shore," Dalton replied, raising his voice to its customary shout. "No man who's been nine years with me would pull a low-down stunt like—" He stopped guiltily, glanced at Conroy a few feet away. "By thunder, Jack," he concluded wearily, "there's no fool like an old fool. Jest what happened? Yuh hurt bad?"

Waite shook his head. "Only lost some blood, Kurt. I'm all right now."

Briefly, he told Dalton what Conroy had planned to do.

"Is it true—about yuh willin' to me half the Bar X?"

"'Course it's true," Dalton growled. "I told him that—when I advised him to start a-packin'. Because when it comes to a downright choice between him and you—well, hell, there ain't no choice! I knew it the moment I saw yore back pass through the door. I was goin' to ride into town in the mornin' an' drag you back by the ears."

"That," said a determined little voice, "is what *I* was going to do."

Waite grinned happily at golden-haired little Judy Dalton.

"Okay, partner," he said humbly. "I reckon I ain't arguin' with *you*."

Murderous Rustlers Gang Up on a

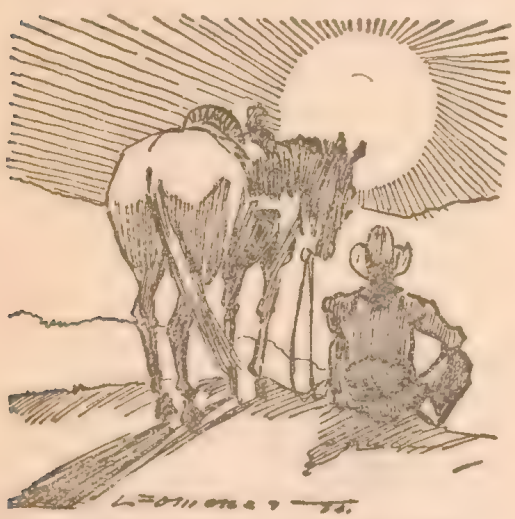
Smart Hombre

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Author of "Gunsmoke Town," "Hoss Sense," etc.

FROM the ledge far up on the mountain a grim-faced figure intently watched the trail below. A moment later he raised his Winchester as he spied a horseman on the trail. His finger squeezed the trigger. The rifle roared.

Below, Steve Taylor cursed as he heard the sound of the shot. His pinto stumbled and then fell as the bullet plowed into the horse's head. Taylor was out of the saddle in one



A grim figure watched the trail

swift leap. His boots dug into the soft earth—and then he was running, heading for a large boulder beside the trail.

There, he peered around the edge of the boulder. He frowned as he gazed at the dead pinto. That had been the best horse in his string. He might have known that he was riding into trouble when he started out in search of the rustlers' hideout.

For over two months now, a band of masked riders had been terrorizing the range. Old Seth Wilson, owner of the Diamond A spread, had been ruthlessly shot and killed when he had ridden out with some of his men to prevent the rustling of his herd. The three waddies with the ranch owner had been badly wounded.

There had been stock stolen from the other outfits and as foreman of the Circle Y, Taylor craved action. The sheriff and his two deputies had gone out after the rustlers two days ago—but since then nothing had been heard of the lawmen.

"Reckon that feller up there must be th' rustlers' lookout," said Taylor thoughtfully. "But knowin' that don't fry me no eggs." He grunted disgustedly as a bullet from the rifle of the man on the ledge chipped the boulder in front of him. "He's jest wastin' bullets long as I stay where I am."

"You ain't stayin', though," said a hard voice behind him. "Lift 'em high!"

Taylor whirled to find himself staring into the muzzle of a Colt held in the hand of a thick-set man dressed in range clothes. The Circle Y foreman slowly raised his arms above his head. He berated himself for not having realized someone might be following him. He should have watched the trail behind him.

"Looks like yuh got me," he said quietly. "An' yuh wouldn't be coverin' me with yore gun if yuh wasn't one of th' rustlers."

"Guessed it first crack out of th' box," the stocky man laughed. "I'm Matt Walsh—mebbe yuh've heard of me."

"That's somethin' I missed up to now," said Taylor, studying the out-

law intently. There was no doubt that Walsh was a very egotistical individual or he would not have been so willing to reveal his name. "But now yuh got me, what yuh aimin' to do with me?"

"Take yuh to the hideout," answered Walsh. "It's a right nice walk—'bout four miles from here. Pull that gun o' yores outa the holster and drop it to the ground." The rustler's eyes flashed. "But don't get any ideas while yuh're doin' it."

Taylor hesitated and then slowly obeyed. Walsh motioned him back and then picked up the foreman's weapon. He thrust it into his belt —still covering Taylor with the gun in his right hand.

"Stay there," snapped Walsh as he started backing away.

Taylor stood motionless until the rustler reached his mount. In the brief instant that it took Walsh to swing into the saddle Taylor leaned down and scooped up two good-sized stones.

HE was standing patiently, just as Walsh had left him as the outlaw rode back to him.

"Yuh gonna make me walk four miles in these boots?" he demanded anxiously.

"Right," Walsh grinned. "I ain't takin' any chances with yuh, hombre."

Taylor didn't bother to argue. He turned and started plodding toward the entrance of the canyon. His hands clutched the two stones close to his body as he walked.

The rustler urged his horse forward so that it nearly trampled on the Circle Y foreman.

Suddenly, Taylor made a leap to one side. His right arm came up, and he hurled a stone. The rock caught Walsh full in the mouth and sent him reeling back.

Taylor lunged for the outlaw—caught him by the gunbelt and pulled him from the saddle. Walsh went down with a thud. Taylor leaped on him as the rustler hit the ground, caught him by the throat with his right hand while he brought the stone in his left crashing down on Walsh's skull. The outlaw went limp.

Taylor stooped to remove the two guns from the unconscious rustler. He stuck his own weapon back into his holster—the other gun he stuck between the waistband of his levis and his shirt. Then he caught Walsh's horse and swung into the saddle.

For a moment he sat thinking. If he rode back out of the canyon, the lookout would spot him from the ledge. If he rode into the gulch, he would be heading for the outlaws' hangout. Still, Walsh had said it was four miles away—there was a chance that he might be able to get closer without being detected.

He rode on through the pass. Soon he found himself in a huge box canyon. There was a clump of cottonwoods growing a short distance from the pass. He walked his horse to the trees and then dismounted and crept forward. As he stood hidden by the shadow of the thick branches he could see a collection of buildings not more than a hundred yards away. To the west of the buildings a herd of cattle was grazing.

"Walsh was lyin' when he said it was four miles away," remarked Taylor. "Reckon he jest wanted to cheer me up about walkin' it."

It had been morning when Taylor had started out in search of the rustlers' hideout, but he had covered a good bit of territory before he had finally ridden along the trail leading into the canyon and found himself in trouble. It was late afternoon when the lookout on the ledge had fired at him and killed his horse.

He realized that the outlaws' nest was not difficult to find—provided one could get past the man on the ledge. He decided that it was probably far simpler to get into the canyon, after once succeeding in passing the guard, than it was to get out again. Taylor was sure that Sheriff Hill and his two deputies had probably discovered that to their sorrow.

He hurried back through the trees

after his horse—uttered a string of profanity when he discovered that the horse he had taken from Walsh had wandered away.

Cautiously he advanced toward the outlaw stronghold, ducking behind trees and rocks as he proceeded, and breathed a sigh of relief as he reached a shed close to the cabin. Here there were a number of saddles on a rack. As he ducked into the shed, he heard voices from the cabin. He sneaked close and peered through the window. There were four men in the room. Four heavily-armed and hard-faced hombres. Then he discovered that the sheriff and his two deputies were tied up in one corner.

Taylor's first impulse was to send lead roaring through the window—but then he decided against it. He couldn't help Hill and the sheriff's deputies that way.

He picked up one of the heavy saddles with the intention of getting a horse from the cavvy corral and having it ready for a quick getaway.

Just as he stepped out of the shed with the saddle in his hand, one of the outlaws appeared from around the corner of the house, hand streaking for his gun. The rustler's gun roared. Taylor lifted the saddle in front of him as a shield. The slug found lodging in the leather.

Taylor's gun flamed as he lowered the saddle. The outlaw whirled half around, dropped to the ground. From the cabin came the shouts of excited men. Taylor dropped the saddle and wrenched the gun he had taken from Walsh out of his waistband.

He stood waiting with a gun in each hand as the three remaining outlaws came rushing out. Then his guns barked. The outlaw leader dropped—a bullet in his brain. One of the other men fired. Taylor felt a searing pain along his right side as a bullet nicked his ribs.

The outlaws had retreated toward the door of the cabin. As Taylor fired again they leaped back inside and closed the door. The Circle Y foreman's bullets smashed against the wood—and then both guns clicked on empty chambers.

HE dropped the smoking Colts—leaned down and grabbed the weapons out of the dead leader's hand. Swiftly he dashed around to the side of the cabin. As he peered in through the window he saw that the outlaws still thought that he was in front, for they were crouched on either side of the closed door.

Taylor raised the weapon in his right hand. The gun roared twice. The first shot got the man at the left of the door. The second slug caught the remaining rustler in the gun arm—and his Colt clattered to the floor.

"All right," the man shouted. "I quit—don't shoot again!"

Taylor holstered his gun and climbed in through the window. Hastily he released the sheriff and the two deputies. He was sure that if they had heard the shooting Walsh and the lookout had not lingered in the vicinity.

"You been cleanin' up these hombres all by yourself?" demanded the sheriff. "It shore sounded like there was a riot goin' on outside."

"Well, not exactly alone," Taylor grinned. "These rustlers have sort of been givin' me material aid, as th' feller says. First, they loaned me a hoss and an extra gun. Then I borrowed a saddle that come in right handy. Guess you might say that I finished things up with rustlers' guns!"

A Complete Novelette of Quick-Trigger Thrills

ROAMING GUNS By TOM CURRY

In Next Month's Issue of THRILLING WESTERN

The Broken Spur

Where the Cottonwoods Collaborate with the Verdict of Judge Lynch, It Takes Sheer Wit and Nerve for Tom Steele to Outface the Charge of Murder!

A Complete Novelette

By BRUCE DOUGLAS

Author of "Trouble on Misty River," "Saddle Tramp," etc.

CHAPTER I

Evidence of Rustling

IN all the forty years of his life—and he had begun riding range at fifteen—Tom Steele had never done quite so thorough a job of rounding up sleepers as he was doing in this spring roundup of Limping River Valley.

Tom realized it himself; and the thought brought a flicker of a smile to his leathery face as he squatted before his little campfire there in the mouth of that little gulch in the Sawtooth Range.

It wasn't that he had ever slacked on the job. He was rated as a first-class cowman and an A-1 hand. But even the most conscientious and able cow-hand can't be expected to do quite so thorough a job as the owner of a brand.

Tom Steele

That was the difference. That was the thing that made this roundup different from all earlier roundups in Tom Steele's experience. He was the owner of a brand. In every bunch of sleepers picked up by the reps who were making the final sweep of the draws and foothill gullies of the Sawtooth Mountains on the west of Limping River Valley, and over to the east at the foot of old Thunder Mountain and Madcap Peak which hemmed in the valley on that side—in every bunch that was picked up and driven in toward the big main herd there might be three or four critters wearing the Slash-S brand. Only one or two, perhaps, in a group of fifty; but those one or two might be just the ones to be overlooked and left behind in the brush if one were careless in searching them out.

Consequently Tom had scoured the brush with painstaking thoroughness in the last two days; and he would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that not a maverick or slickear, not a cow or wary old mossback had eluded his search through those ten miles of canyons and brush-choked gullies which he had covered. Cornered in the V-shaped little gulch,

He fired half a dozen shots over the heads of the posse. "Come on an' git me!" he yelled

bedded down between steeply slanting walls of granite, their only exit barred by Tom's campfire, upward of thirty steers were awaiting the final drive in the morning which would take them down the remaining slopes to the roundup herd on the floor of Limping River Valley.

There were three Slash-S steers in Tom's gather, and one rangy old cow with a big calf still trotting at her heels. Five in thirty. Tom made a mental calculation. Then he grimaced.

No sense in building air-castles like that. You couldn't count on the other reps to make as good a drag. And you couldn't count on his pick-up being average. Why, if five steers in thirty in the whole valley roundup turned up with the Slash-S brand, he'd show a better than average increase in spite of the rustling that had been nibbling into the Limping River cattle for the better part of the year.

HE looked up sharply at the sound of footsteps in the outer darkness. Then a pleased smile wrinkled his leathery face as Eddie McLean stepped into the circle of firelight. Eddie and Tom were buddies—had been ever since Tom had picked Eddie up half a dozen years ago, a sickly tenderfoot, and had made a man and a cowman of the youngster.

Eddie kicked a log over toward the fire and sat down. Without speaking, he produced papers and Bull Durham and rolled a smoke. He had taken and exhaled two long drags before he spoke, his tanned, clean-cut young face serious.

"Partner, I believe I've got hold of somethin'."

Tom had been eyeing the young man keenly during this interval. He noted a tenseness about him, and signs of unusual gravity.

"Spit it out," he replied shortly. "What yuh got?"

Eddie flicked ashes nervously toward the campfire. "Rustler sign."

Tom started. Rustling had been getting to be something worse than a nuisance in Limping River Valley. There is always some rustling, of course; but when it gets beyond a certain scale, it begins cutting in on profits until it hurts. And Tom's Slash-S was just in that crucial third year where the normal increase of a small herd should pay off the last of the debts incurred in getting started.

Where to a big ranch like the W-8 loss of a few steers meant merely decreased profits, to him the same loss might spell the difference between success and failure.

"Rustler sign, eh?"

Eddie nodded. "Look here, Tom." He picked up a stick and began making marks in the dust. First he drew a diagonal line, then the letter S beside it.

Tom nodded. "That's my brand all right. What then?"

For answer Eddie continued the line of the S until it had become a figure 8. Then he made three up-and-down lines to the left of the slash. The Slash-S brand had become a W-8. Silently Eddie looked up, his eyes meeting Tom's.

For a long moment they sat there, looking at each other. Then Tom shook his head. "Callum Waite was runnin' his brand on steers in Limping River Valley when you was in knee pants and I was a forty-a-month cowpoke, an' neither one of us had ever heard o' this valley," he remarked. "So it don't mean nothin'. Jest happens-so that my brand will change easy to his. But mine come last. Now ef th' Slash-S had been here first, an' Waite come in later an' started his W-8 iron, that'd be different. Besides"—he glanced keenly across at the young man—"I jest had a notion that yuh set pretty high stock by this Waite family."

Eddie flushed. "I ain't stickin' up fer th' whole family," he snorted. "Ner settin' up with it, neither. Jest 'cause I'm engaged tuh marry a gal ain't no proof that her paw don't throw a wide loop. That ain't no reflection on Jean. An' ef I find that Callum Waite has been improvin' a few Slash-S brands, I aim tuh speak tuh him about it, Jean or no Jean." He got up and began pac-

ing nervously up and down in front of the fire.

"Don't get yore shirt-tail in a knot," the older man advised calmly. "Callum Waite has a pretty good reppitation hereabouts. Unless yuh've got evidence a heap better'n what yuh've jest showed me, I'd advise yuh—"

"But I have!" Eddie whirled on him. "I've got twenty sleepers holed up in a blind canyon half a mile to th' south. Two o' 'em is wearin' mighty fuzzy W-8 brands. Mighty fuzzy. I come over tuh borrow yore huntin' knife. Broke mine on a can o' beans."

"Yuh mean—?"

Eddie's lean face grew grim. "I mean I'm thinkin' that W-8 brand shows on th' outside only. That an inside view of a square o' hide ud be likely tuh read Slash-S. I'm aimin' tuh butcher me a steer or two an' find out!"

Tom Steele drew a knife from its sheath at his belt and handed it over. "An' if yuh find out that they're Slash-S?"

Eddie's eyes narrowed. His next words came through clenched teeth. "Nobody but Callum Waite could profit by a Slash-S steer changin' tuh a W-8," he replied. "If I find they've been changed, then I aim tuh hunt up Callum Waite an' make *wau-wau* with him!"

Tom Steele stood up and faced his young buddy. "Eddie," he said seriously, a deep undertone of affection in his tone, "I brung yuh up an' taught yuh all yuh know. Ef I say it myself, I done a good job. I'm trustin' yuh not tuh go off half-cocked; an' whatever play yuh make, yuh c'n trust me tuh back it! All I say is, keep yore head cool, fella."

"Trust me fer that," Eddie replied. He thrust the knife into his belt and started down the slope. "I won't take any action unless I've got proof." Half a dozen steps beyond the circle of firelight he stopped and turned. "I'll bring yore knife back soon's I'm through with it," he said. "Yuh'll likely be needin' it tomorrow."

Tom Steele turned back to his fire. After a short time he rose, made a final inspection of the bedded cattle, and rolled up in his blankets.

He did not know how long he had been sleeping when Eddie waked him. It was still dark, and he was half groggy with sleep.

"I put yore knife back in its sheath, Tom," Eddie murmured, leaning over him. "An' listen, Tom, them brands both read Slash-S on th' inside!"

"Uh-yeah?" Tom grunted, yawning. Then he closed his eyes and rolled over, instantly asleep again.

CHAPTER II

Wanted for Murder

ALL that morning and for most of the afternoon Tom Steele worked with increasing uneasiness. Methodically he broke camp and got his gather of steers moving. And throughout the day he pushed them steadily through the broken, brushy foothills toward the roundup herd on the floor of Limping River Valley.

But his mind was not on his work. Only the ingrained experience of a quarter century of range riding kept him from losing drifters from his little drive, for his mind was increasingly occupied with many other things.

He was worried. Increasingly worried. The memory of that last night's conversation with Eddie kept coming back to him, and his mind was flooded with misgivings. Eddie had borrowed that knife to use in removing the branded hide from one or more butchered steers.

To find out whether the steers had originally been branded W-8, or whether the original brand was his Slash-S and the rest of the W-8 had been added on the outside only by means of hair-branding. And Eddie had said that if the evidence showed that the brands had been altered, he intended to hunt up old Callum Waite and make *wau-wau* with him.

Tom could imagine what that meant. Making *wau-wau* with Callum Waite over misbranded cattle—Fight talk! Fight talk in man's language, unless both men in the conference kept their heads. And Eddie was young, impetuous, hot-headed; while Callum Waite ruled the broad kingdom of his great spread—wisely, yes; justly, yes; but with the heavy hand and the roaring voice of a king grizzly.

How would Callum Waite react when a man came to him with evidence that Slash-S steers had been changed to W-8? Tom himself was loath to believe that the old grizzly was guilty of rustling. He would have laid those facts before Callum Waite as evidence that some third person was trying to work up enmity between two honest cowmen.

BUT what would hot-headed Eddie McLean say? And what answer would Callum Waite make to the young man who aspired to marry his daughter?

Tom remembered vaguely being waked up in the night. Eddie had returned his knife. His hand moved in to feel the hilt of it and make sure that this memory was correct. Eddie had said something, too. Yes, the memory became more distinct now. Eddie had said that those steers were Slash-S on the inside of the hide. And instead of sitting up and arguing some sense into Eddie, Tom had simply rolled over and gone back to sleep! He groaned at the recollection.

Late in the afternoon, when he was close enough to the valley to get occasional glimpses of the big herd, and another half hour's driving would add his gather to the main bunch, something else happened to increase his uneasiness. Hod Veckner joined him from the rear.

Veckner was pushing only ten steers; so he could move along much faster than Tom could with his greater number. Tom edged his horse off the trail to let the ten go by and join his drive; then Veckner joined him, and the two pushed on together.

"Seen anything o' Eddie McLean?" Veckner inquired.

Tom's glance tried not to be unfriendly. He felt an instinctive dislike for the burly, beetle-browed, shifty-eyed homesteader; but he had found no evidence on which to base the dislike, and he tried hard to be fair. Looks don't always tell what an hombre is like on the inside, as Tom had found out in forty years of range life.

If Hod Veckner chose to surround himself with a hard bunch of gun-slinging cowhands, that might be explained by the fact that he wanted to guard his little spread from the rustlers who were preying on Limping River herds. So Tom reserved his judgment. But he didn't like Hod Veckner.

"Seen Eddie? No. Why?" The quickness of his reply indicated the worry and strain he felt.

Hod Veckner spurred forward, whooped a straggler up toward the main drive, then dropped back.

"Ragan an' me come upon a couple dozen steers hold up in a blind canyon. McLean had been combin' brush right along thar, an' it looked like his father. But McLean wa'n't nowhere in sight. We waited some. Then I left Ragan to drive in that bunch an' come along with mine. So yuh ain't seen 'im, eh?"

Tom shook his head.

"Ain't got no idea where he might be?" Veckner insisted.

A sudden instinct warned Tom to be cautious, and he acted on the hunch. No use blabbing everything you know. After all, Eddie might have got himself into a peck of trouble and not want his whereabouts known.

And this Veckner hombre seemed almighty curious as to what Tom might know.

He shook his head. "Ain't seen 'im since th' pick-up circle started," he lied. "Figgered he was about five mile behind me. Ef he don't show up after we git these critters intuh th' main herd, reckon I'll push on back an' have a look. He might 'a' got bucked off an' broke a leg or

somethin'. Yuh reckon that's what happened?"

He glanced keenly at Veckner; but Veckner hurriedly turned his shifty eyes away and spurred toward the head of the drive, turning them down the final gentle slope toward the valley floor.

Tom's attention was drawn by a commotion down at the main herd. Riders were milling around, gathering in a group. Others at the nearby wagon were hastily mounting their horses. In a moment a dozen or more men were spurring their mounts across that scant quarter mile that separated Tom from the roundup wagon.

They spread out, and came in toward Tom in a half circle. As they came closer, Tom noted that Sheriff Doak was in the lead. And the riders were watching him grimly, their free hands hanging close to their beltguns.

Noting these signs of impending trouble, Tom reined in and waited passively while they surrounded him. He was alone in the center of the circle. Hod Veckner had pulled aside, and now was in the rear of the group of grim-faced riders.

"Got yore huntin' knife with yuh?" Sheriff Doak fixed Tom with steely eyes.

Surprised, Tom nodded. "Shore. What's up, Sheriff?"

"Let's see it!"

Tom noted that hands crept in closer to gun butts and the circling riders watched him alertly as he reached in to his belt. He drew out the knife.

"Here it is. Now mebbe yuh'd have some explanation—"

"That ain't yore knife!" The words came from Fred Simmons, the superintendent of the big W-8 spread, now acting as roundup foreman. "We all know th' markin's on yore huntin' knife. This one is plain, an' new."

In reaching down to his sheath and drawing out the knife, Tom had kept his eyes on the sheriff and the other men who were grimly ringing him in. For the first time, he dropped his glance to the knife in his hand. Then he started. The roundup foreman was right. That knife which he held was not his knife!

Tom's eyes narrowed, and thoughts began buzzing frenziedly in his head. What could be the explanation? Why were these men so interested in his knife? And why wasn't his knife there in his scabbard where Eddie had told him he put it? Why had Eddie put a strange knife there —and why had he told Tom that it was the same knife he had borrowed?

His eyes narrowed. Here was a mystery. But first he must know more about why the sheriff and these others were interested in his knife.

"Jest why," he demanded calmly, staring at the sheriff, "are yuh askin' questions about my knife?"

SHERIFF DOAK colored angrily. "Because," he growled, "yore knife was found early this mornin' stickin' intuh Callum Waite, that's why! I'm arrestin' yuh fer murder, hombre!"

For a long moment Tom Steele sat his mount in startled silence, his brain reeling. His knife—Callum Waite murdered—with his knife! And Eddie had brought a different knife—had slipped it into his scabbard while he slept, and had told him that he was returning his knife!

His mind visualized what might have happened. Eddie discovering that those fuzzy W-8 brands read Slash-S on the inside of the hide—a meeting with Callum Waite—perhaps a chance meeting, just running into each other out there in the hills — accusations, followed by a struggle in which Callum Waite was stabbed.

But why, why—Tom's brain strove dizzily for the answer—why did Eddie bring another knife and put it in his scabbard, telling him it was his?

The answer eluded him. All he was sure of was that Eddie must have meant something by it. He must have expected Tom to understand the act and gather some sort of message from it. Eddie wasn't the sort to frame a pal. He rejected that

idea before it was completely formed.

Then Eddie must have some good reason for what he had done. And that was enough to know. He couldn't figure out the rest; but he knew that Eddie was relying on him to back the play he had made. Slowly he turned his eyes full on the sheriff.

"Where did this killin' take place?"

"In Limpin' River Gap, right down by th' river," the sheriff replied. "As though yuh didn't know. Yuh killed 'im, hombre; an' yuh'll swing fer it. Now lift yore right hand an' use yore other tuh onloose yore gunbelt an' let it fall. Easy, now!"

Tom's horse was standing facing down the slope. Tom Steele glanced swiftly out of the corner of his eye, turning his head slightly to get the view to the rear. Most of the posse had crowded up to the side or front of him, watching his face as he was accused. There were only two men behind him. Tom noted that they had not drawn their guns, though their hands were close to them.

To gain time, he slowly raised his right hand into the air. With his knee he gently edged his horse backward. One step, two, three steps backward the horse made, while Tom kept the group's attention by fumbling with his left hand at his gunbelt. The backing horse had edged in between the two who were behind him. Then Tom swung into lightning action!

His right hand came down with a resounding smack on the horse's neck, and his spurs jabbed deep into his flanks. The startled animal swung completely about and leaped up the slope. At the same time, Tom's hands filled with twin gunbutts. He fired half a dozen shots over the heads of the posse.

"Come an' git me!" he yelled.

On the strength of the surprise, Tom's horse gained a lead of some forty yards before the posse could think to grab for their guns. Then lead screamed and whined all around the fugitive as the yelling posse spurred their horses into galloping pursuit.

CHAPTER III

Escape

TOM'S horse had not worked hard that day, but he had worked very steadily and was far from fresh; whereas some of the pursuing riders were mounted on horses which had been resting all day. Tom realized that he could not possibly win out in a straight dash. He must either manage to elude his pursuers or else pick out a likely spot and stop and shoot it out with them.

But he did not want to shoot any of them. These men were his neighbors in Limping River Valley. Good, honest cattlemen, doing what they considered to be their duty. If Tom's knife had been found in the body of Callum Waite, then his dash for freedom was certain to convince everybody of his guilt. An innocent man would be expected to surrender and strive to prove his innocence.

Which was exactly what Tom intended them to believe. He couldn't figure out any other explanation for Eddie's putting that other knife in his belt except that Eddie wanted him to take the blame for this killing. How Eddie intended to clear things up afterward was another mystery; but just at present it was up to Tom to back Eddie's play.

And he was backing it to the limit—accepting the blame for a murder, practically confessing to it by running away instead of submitting to arrest.

But just because Tom realized how guilty he had made himself look in the eyes of that posse, he couldn't bring himself to shoot any of them even while they were trying their best to shoot him down—and might even string him up to the nearest tree if they caught him.

Fortunately for him, the heavy brush began almost immediately on the back trail. Only for a moment

did the bullets whine around him as he began his dash for freedom. One sliced through the rim of his hat close to his ear; but he remained unhit. And no sudden jerk from his horse betrayed a hit that might set him afoot at the mercy of the posse.

At full gallop they passed into the shelter of a growth of new cedar. Tom swung to the south and headed along that back trail which he had ridden in such leisurely fashion earlier that day. Bobbing in and out through the trees, only occasionally did a posseman come within sight. Then hot lead came winging his way; but each time he got out of view before any careful aiming could be done.

The sun was low on the Sawtooth Mountains, and Tom was congratulating himself that darkness would soon arrive and he could slip away unseen, when it happened. A rider who knew the curves and contours of this mountain trail had cut out across a gully and pushed in again ahead of him. When Tom rounded a bend, he was waiting for him, down on one knee in the dust of the trail, rifle carefully aimed.

IN the instant that Tom took in the man ahead of him, he jerked his horse sideward. The animal reared—and in doing so saved his master's life. The screaming bullet buried itself in the horse's brain, and the animal slumped heavily to the ground. Tom went hurtling over the horse's head, straight at the posseman, who was raising the rifle for another shot.

With a quick rolling somersault, Tom was on his feet in a scrambling run. The posseman pressed trigger, and the bullet fanned by Tom's ear. Then the posseman dropped the rifle and stood to grapple with the fleeing man. But instead of taking the two steps which would have thrown them together, a flailing, fighting mass, Tom stepped quickly aside.

The posseman's horse was standing nearby. Before his intention was known, Tom had reached the animal's side and grasped the reins. Another bullet screamed after him as he swung aboard and drove home his spurs. Then he was again out of sight in the lead.

The new horse under him was fresh; Tom could tell that in the first burst of speed. A big, rangy mustang, the animal had probably not been worked at all that day, but had been cut out of the cavvy just before Tom and Hod Veckner had put in an appearance driving their combined gather of sleepers.

Tom congratulated himself on his luck. He couldn't have picked a better mount if he had had the whole cavvy to choose from. Changing his plan, he settled down to out-run the posse.

By the time that darkness was falling in the canyons and gullies that scarred the eastern slopes of the Sawtooth range, Tom drew his lathered animal to a halt.

He pulled in to the shelter of a small grove of live-oaks and sat listening.

For a long time he sat motionless. No sound came to him from along the back trail. Presently he swung his horse about and headed down the slope toward the floor of the valley. In his mind was a plan. If Eddie had come across Callum Waite in the gap through which Limping River flowed between the Sawtooth Range and Thunder Mountain, and if he had quarreled with him there and killed him—well, Tom thought he knew Eddie well enough to know that the impetuous young man would be very likely to leave some convicting evidence behind him.

And what was the use in sacrificing himself for his buddy, only to have evidence turn up later which would convict him?

It was taking him into danger again after he had fought his way clear and the trail to the Border and the safety of Mexico lay directly before him.

But Tom was not inclined to do things by halves.

He intended to be in Limping River Gap at dawn. He would inspect with his own eyes the scene where the murder took place, and make sure that no damning evidence remained behind.

CHAPTER IV

Murder Sign

ON the east, old Thunder Mountain sloped steeply down to the edge of Limping River. On the west, the southernmost peak in the Sawtooth Range stretched its base out to the right banks of the stream.

The gap through which Limping River flowed out of Limping River Valley into the wastelands to the south was only a scant hundred yards wide in most places; and at one point the granite walls rose precipitously on both sides at the very edge of the stream.

In the narrows stood a line cabin, where W-8 cow-hands were wont to stand watch for rustlers; for this was the extreme southern end of the valley range, and through this gap cattle had been known to disappear into the wastelands beyond. And just a few miles to the south lay the Border.

In the dim light of dawn, Tom Steele approached the little line cabin warily. His black horse walked wearily, worn out by the night's riding. A full twenty miles behind lay the center of Limping River Valley, where the roundup herd had waited the addition of Tom's circle gather the afternoon before. And stretched along those twenty miles, searching gully and coulee, brush pile and thicket, the whole man-power of Limping River Valley were out seeking the man they believed to be the murderer of Callum Waite.

Tom's sudden turn down to the floor of the valley had fooled them. They had lost his trail completely, and had been forced to proceed very slowly, hampered by darkness, searching each and every gully and canyon along the length of the Sawtooth Range.

Dismounting, Tom hid his tired horse in a thicket. He waited a minute while the animal drank thirstily at the stream, then led him back into a willow grove and tied him there. Then he crept warily toward the line cabin. The last fifty yards of the distance he covered on his stomach, worming along in the dust, his right-hand six-gun clenched in his fist.

No sound came from the cabin. Reaching the sun-bleached wall, he rose cautiously and peered in at the little window. Then he walked to the door and flung it open. The cabin was empty. Immediately he turned and walked toward the river.

He found little difficulty in locating the spot where Callum Waite had been killed. The story was written plainly in the dust. Some twenty yards from the edge of the stream he found horse tracks. Then footprints of two men. They had evidently stood there for some time, apparently in consultation.

Tom noted that one of the two had a habit of resting his weight on one foot and dragging the other foot sideways. There were parallel scratches in the dust where a rowel had been scraped through it.

Suddenly he leaned forward and peered intently at this sign. It was repeated in several places: three parallel lines made by the three spokes of a spur. But one thing he noticed particularly. In each case the middle line of the three began about an inch later than the other two. He squatted down and measured the lines with the span of his finger and thumb.

The outside lines, in one case, measured about eight inches in length; the middle one began about an inch after the other two had started, and left off an inch before they did, so that the middle line was only six inches long. In another case, the rowel had been dragged a full twelve inches sideward; but the middle line was only ten inches long.

Carefully Tom backtracked the pair. Finally he came to what he sought. Back at the place where the rider had dismounted, he found another set of tracks where the spur had been dragged. But in this case the middle line was just as long as the others. He peered intently at the dust. Then he reached down and picked up an object, which he stowed in a vest pocket. With a sigh of re-

lief, he carefully obliterated all the spur tracks with his foot.

Farther down toward the river, he found the place where Callum Waite had been stabbed. There was little sign of a struggle, if any — just a spurt of blood which had clotted and dried on the surface of the powdery dust, then the mark made by a falling body, and another pool of dried blood beside and partly overlapping this mark made by the body. Numerous footprints surrounded this spot —the marks, Tom assumed, of the W-8 riders who had found and carried off the body of their dead employer.

Tom looked carefully for more of those parallel spur tracks, but found no more. Satisfied, he turned to go. Then he galvanized into rapid action. His quick glance had caught a glimpse of a rider just rounding a bend some distance upstream. The man was closing in to the narrows.

Impossible now to get away unseen. He must surprise the man, capture him, and leave him tied up so that he could not warn other possemen that their quarry was found. Quick as a flash, he wheeled and scuttled across the open space to the cabin. Inside, he slipped over to a window.

Early morning mists from the river still hung in the air. It was hard to see far in the grey of early dawn; and the man remained only a dim outline until he had come fairly close to the line cabin. When he was definitely within easy bullet range, Tom leaned out of the window, both .45s trained on the rider.

"H'ist 'em, hombre!" he commanded sharply. "An' don't let out a yell, or I'll put a bullet right through yore gizzard!" Then his jaw sagged laxly downward, and his guns drooped also. "Well, I'll be a son of a buzzard!" Quickly holstering his guns, he drew away from the window and dashed out the door of the cabin.

Eddie had dismounted by the time he came out. The young man trailed reins in the dust and sought a seat on the edge of the door stoop. Tom stood facing him, speechless. Eddie produced papers and Durham and built a quirly. He thumbed a match into flame, drew twice on the smoke, inhaling deeply. Then he flipped the match away.

"Well, Old-Timer," Eddie remarked cheerfully. "We both of us seem to've got th' same idea."

"Wha—what d'yuh mean?" Tom stammered.

Eddie waved an expressive hand. "Well, soon's I got tuh town an' heard th' news, I high-tailed it fer th' scene o' th' crime. I allowed that there might be some convictin' evidence layin' around that might better be removed. I reckon that's why yuh come here, too, ain't it?"

TOM nodded. Eddie grinned cheerfully at him. "Don't look so plumb downhearted, pardner," he drawled. "Now that we've found each other, let's have a little confab. What place d'yuh think we'd better head for? How about that Ojo del Diablo country? It's good rangeland, an' far enough south o' th' Border so's we c'n settle down there."

Again Tom's jaw sagged. "We?" he repeated. "We? Yuh ain't comin' along with me. Yuh're goin' back an' marry yore gal an' be th' king-pin in Limpin' River Valley. If yuh was comin' along with me, what was th' use o' framin' that killin' onto me? Yuh could jest 'a' told me yuh done it, an' th' two o' us could 'a' rode away plumb peaceful-like night before last!"

Amazement wrote itself plainly on Eddie McLean's clean-cut young face. "Framed that killin' on yuh?" he repeated. "Yuh mean—yuh mean yuh didn't—didn't do it, partner?"

Tom's eyes fairly bulged. In his excitement his voice rose almost to a falsetto. "Kill Waite?" he inquired. "How th' devil could I kill 'em? Yuh come an' borry my knife. Then yuh come back an' put a different knife in my scabbard, tellin' me it's th' same one. Then a posse comes after me, tellin' me that Callum Waite has been stabbed with my knife. *Me* stab 'im? How th' devil could I stab 'im when yuh had my knife? I thought—"

He broke off, staring excitedly at his partner. Eddie's voice was choked

when he made reply. "Yuh don't need tuh go on," he gulped. "I know what yuh thought. An' what yuh done. Yuh thought I'd stabbed Callum Waite an' fixed it so's yuh'd be suspected. An' yuh—yuh figgered tuh back me up in whatever play I made, even tuh th' point o' takin' th' blame fer a murder!"

Tom flicked out a handkerchief and blew his nose loudly. "We're wastin' time," he announced briskly. "'Pears like we each thought th' other one done it, but neither o' us did. Now we've got a bit o' thinkin' tuh do tuh pull us out o' this tight."

Abruptly Eddie stood by, facing his partner. "Listen," he commanded. "Last night—I guess I mean night before last, 'cause it's mornin' again now—I went back tuh slaughter those fuzzy-branded steers. I found Hod Veckner there, with a fire built an' a steer roped. Hod told me he suspicioned th' brand on th' steer an' meant tuh investigate. I told 'im I was aimin' tuh do th' same thing. So we went tuh work together."

He paused, then slapped his thigh with a resounding clap. "The only way I c'n figger it is that Hod Veckner changed knives with me. We was workin' clost together."

Tom nodded thoughtfully. "Mebbe that explains them fuzzy W-8 brands, too," he added. "I'd never believe that Callum Waite was changin' brands on our Slash-S steers. Looks tuh me like Hod was aimin' tuh git yuh all worked up agin' Waite, then steal yore knife an' kill Waite with it!"

"But why?" Eddie's brow wrinkled with puzzlement. "What'd he gain by that?"

Tom snorted. "Why, rustlin', o' course. It'd git rid o' Waite an' you at one shot, an' leave th' biggest spread in Limpin' River Valley in charge o' an inexperienced gal."

Eddie nodded decidedly. "That's it. But how are we goin' tuh prove it an' clear yore name? When yuh run away, yuh practically admitted to th' killin', o' course."

But Tom had got another idea, and was already running toward the spot where his horse was hidden.

"Git yore hoss an' come along!" he flung over his shoulder.

CHAPTER V

Desperate Ruse

HE had scarcely reached his horse when Tom turned and came walking back. "Wait a bit," he said.

Puzzled, Eddie looked to his partner for an explanation. Tom Steele's brow was furrowed in thought.

"We've got tuh work out some way tuh bring th' hull posse a-hellin' this way."

Eddie gasped. "Fer gosh sakes, why?"

"Listen," Tom ordered. "I'm playin' a hunch. Mebbe it's right, mebbe it ain't. If it ain't, I'm jest th' same as shovin' my head in a noose. But it shore looks right tuh me. An' it's th' one way tuh git out o' this jam without bein' forced tuh foller th' outlaw trail from now on."

Eddie's hands dropped to his gun butts. "I got yuh intuh this mess," he stated, his lips drawn thin. "There'll be plenty o' shootin' done afore anybody loops hemp around yore neck, partner!"

For the first time in two days, Tom grinned. "Yuh'll be doin' a heap o' shootin' right soon, Eddie. An' most o' it will be in my direction. Now yuh listen tuh me. Assumin' that Hod Veckner changed them brands tuh work up trouble between you an' Callum Waite, an' assumin' that he murdered Waite tuh git him an' you both out o' th' way, an' assumin' furthermore that th' reason he done it was to make it easier fer 'im tuh rustle Limpin' River cattle—"

He paused. Eddie nodded. "Then what?"

"We-ell," Tom drawled thoughtfully, "what would yuh reckon a hombre like that ud be likely tuh do if all th' man-power o' th' valley dashed off intuh th' foothills, leavin' practically every cow-critter in Limpin' River Valley already gathered intuh a herd—unguarded—an' all ready tuh be drove?"

There was a grim twinkle in his eyes as Tom watched the young man's face. First the eyes widened in surprise, then the jaw dropped, so that the lips parted a little.

"Well, I'll be— By gosh, I believe yuh've hit it!"

Tom nodded. "O' course I have. Now th' straight drive tuh Mexico would take 'em through this here gap. But all them various posse is strung along th' sides o' this valley, an' they'd see th' herd movin'. So I'd figger that Veckner an' his gun-slingin' waddies 'd push th' herd east through th' pass between Madcap an' Thunder, an' bring 'em south along th' valley at th' east side o' Thunder Mountain. If I'm right, they oughtn't tuh be more'n a few miles back, an' jest around th' base o' Thunder here."

Eddie faced his partner grimly. "Veckner's got a bunch o' mighty hard gunmen," he stated. "An' if they're cleanin' out th' Valley in one big sweep, they'll all be with that drive. I don't reckon th' two o' us c'n do much more'n go down fightin', but I'm willin'—"

"That's why we've got tuh attract th' posse, an' fast! Come on. I saw a box o' dynamite in that line cabin. That ought tuh bring 'em!"

The two men hurried to the cabin, and came out lugging a powder box. Tom picked a spot almost a hundred yards down stream from the cabin, and they carried the box there. On the edge of the stream in the narrows they placed it; and Tom cut a length of fuse. Slashing one stick of the powder with his knife, he inserted the fuse and tucked the stick back in the box. He ordered Eddie to bring up both their horses before he lighted the fuse.

"I ain't overly familiar with this stuff," he admitted. "An' I'll feel safer if I c'n git a hoss between my legs as soon's I light this fuse. I don't know jest what tuh expect from settin' off a hull box; but I reckon it'll be heard some distance, an'll bring riders a-plenty."

He lighted a match and touched it to the fuse. As soon as it began to sputter, he ran to his horse and then mounted. The two men rode rapidly to the left around the base of Thunder Mountain. Not until a whole generous section of granite mountain base was between them and the sputtering fuse did they draw rein.

And it was well that they didn't! For minutes that seemed like ages they waited. Tom broke a twig from a nearby live-oak and chewed nervously on it. Eddie puffed at a quirly until it become so hot that it burned his lips. With a muttered oath he threw it down.

"Mebbe th' fuse burned out," he hazarded, swinging his horse about.

Tom reached out and seized his bridle. "Yuh stay right here," he commanded. "Yuh ride back tuh find out, an' yuh're liable tuh git yore fool head blowed off—not that yuh'd miss it much!"

THE words were hardly spoken when the blast finally went off. Not knowing much about powder, and wishing to make sure that the explosion would be loud enough to attract the possemen who were strung out along the whole length of Limping River Valley combing the gullies along the Sawtooth Range, Tom had set off one hundred forty-four sticks of dynamite under an overhanging ledge!

The concussion was terrific. It seemed as though the mountain beneath them rocked; and the suddenly blasted air gushed by them in a breeze that sent their Stetsons sailing. Only the fact that a buttress of granite at the foot of old Thunder stood between them and the full force of the blast saved their lives.

As it was, the boom of the explosion deafened both of them, so that as their horses catapulted into terrified bucking and leaping, it seemed as though the whole action was taking place in profound silence. Then, just as they were getting the frightened animals under control, rocks and rubbish rained down on them from the skies, and the bucking started all over again.

But both riders were expert horsemen; and in a fairly short time they had taken the kinks out of the

horses, who stood with eyes rolling with fear, but bucked no longer.

Tom grinned over at Eddie. "That fuse didn't burn out, did it?"

Somewhat white of face, Eddie gazed down at a three-foot section of granite which had plopped down within a few feet of where his horse was standing. He shook a shower of ragged gravel out of his shirt.

"Ef th' bronze statue o' Deaf Smith up in th' Texas Panhandle didn't cup a hand behind his ear when that one went off, I miss my guess. Yuh don't need tuh worry about it bringin' yore posse, pardner. Now what?"

Tom nodded up the slope to a promontory; and the two rode their horses in a zigzag trail until they reached the point. From it they could get a view back into Limping River Valley, and also they could see for some distance down the valley to the east of Thunder Mountain.

IN both valleys commotion was visible. Groups of horsemen were emerging from gullies and draws along the Sawtooth Range and riding at breakneck speed toward Limping River Gap. And in the distance in the other valley the two men could make out a pillar of dust such as might be made by the advance of a big herd of cattle.

"We guessed it!" Tom exclaimed excitedly. "Here comes th' posse; an' yonder's th' hull Limpin' River roundup herd. It couldn't be nothin' else but th' hull herd tuh make that much dust!"

For what seemed a long time they waited, watching group after group of possemen come out to the floor of Limping River Valley and join the main posse. When they finally came pounding toward the gap, more than half a hundred men were in that mass of determined riders.

At length, when they were so close that Tom judged they could not help but see the direction he was taking, the two started. First, Tom set spurs to his horse and went dashing and sliding down the slope from the lookout point. Then Eddie followed, both his guns pouring hot lead in Tom's direction but carefully aimed to go far above his head.

As the two broke cover, yells of excitement came from the posse. A few of the more impetuous fired rifles and six-guns, though the distance was too great for them to hope to find a target in the fleeing men. Shouting and yelling, they followed around the base of Thunder Mountain and lined out in the direction of the approaching herd.

As the distance narrowed, Tom and Eddie drew their mount's together and edged closer and closer to the slopes of old Thunder.

Ahead of them the herd loomed. The point riders were already in sight; and they could see men all along the edge of the herd hurrying toward the front. Behind rode the posse, closing in.

Bullets were falling around the fleeing pair now, clipping spurts of dust around the feet of their galloping horses. Coolly the pair gauged the distance. When only a few hundred yards separated the posse and the approaching herd, they swerved to the left and raced for the shelter of the mountain slopes.

The posse swerved too, but only for a moment. For by this time the rustlers were offering them a shower of bullets. Seeing all these men riding down on them with guns spouting lead, they had sought what shelter they could find and settled down to defend the stolen herd.

Met by this sudden resistance, the main body of possemen continued their charge straight down the valley, leaning far over their horses' necks, and blazing away at the embattled rustlers. In a moment they had reached the front of the herd; and men and bawling cattle were intermingled in one swearing, stamping, shooting, bellowing mass.

Finally the terrified cattle turned and stampeded back in the direction in which they had come.

Holding off to one side, out of the main scene of battle, Tom and Eddie searched the mass of fighters with straining eyes. Billowing dust and

drifting powder smoke obstructed their view; but finally Tom's keen old eyes picked out what they sought. With a shout of triumph, he beckoned to Eddie; and together they charged down the slope.

Directly ahead of them, three rustlers lay behind scanty shelter of their dead horses. They turned and threw quick shots upward as the pair thundered down at them. But Tom and Eddie withheld their fire. Straight into those blazing guns they charged, until their rearing horses were almost on top of the rustlers.

Then, as at a signal, both men left their saddles at once. In a flying leap they landed. Tom's arms surrounded his man; his chest struck full against the other's face, and they went down in a mad scramble of arms and legs. Eddie lit sprawling, and came up in time to see the man with whom Tom was grappling raise a six-gun by the barrel and bring it down in sweeping motion toward Tom's skull.

WITH a leap, Eddie crashed into the pair. His shoulder knocked the upraised gun aside. Then his own gun barrel chunked against the side of Hod Veckner's ear, and the chief rustler lay still in Tom's arms.

Tom grunted. Still holding the limp burden, he stood up and looked around. The shooting had ceased. Half a dozen frightened rustlers were standing up, their hands held high in the air. Guns of a dozen possemen covered them. Then someone spotted Tom, and a yell went up. In an instant they were surrounded by a threatening circle of guns.

"We've caught th' murderin' sidewinder this time!" they howled. "String 'im up!"

"Wait!" Eddie McLean made himself heard above the clamor. "Here's yore real murderer, right here!" He pointed toward Hod Veckner, who was just coming back to consciousness.

"Lies! He's tryin' tuh save his pardner! Hang th' pair o' 'em!"

Sheriff Doak stepped in close to the two. He held up a hand. The shouts died away.

"Men," the sheriff exclaimed, "I've been wonderin' about that explosion that brought us all hurryin' to th' Gap. An' when we come 'round old Thunder tuh find ourselves right in place tuh stop th' whole Valley roundup herd from bein' rustled, I'm wonderin' some more. Looks tuh me like these two brought us here a-purpose tuh save that herd. If'n they did, they deserve a hearin' at least!"

The sheriff's words made an impression on the group of men. One or two still shouted for a quick hanging; but there were other more thoughtful men in the bunch, small ranchers who had lived side by side with Tom and Eddie and had formerly liked the pair. They stepped in beside the sheriff.

"How about it?" one of them asked Tom. "Is that what yuh done?"

Tom nodded. "We had it figgered out," he agreed. "An' th' only way tuh clear my name after I made that break was tuh ketch this here murderer afore he got plumb tuh Mexico. Besides," he added, "all o' my little herd was in that roundup, an' I didn't allow tuh lose 'em!"

"Tell us about it," several possemen demanded at once. "Yuh still got a lot o' provin' tuh do, looks like."

Rapidly Tom outlined what had happened and what they had figured out—that Veckner had altered the Slash-S brands to cause bad blood between Callum White and the pair; that he had ridden over to make sure that Eddie wouldn't overlook those fuzzy brands, and had stolen Eddie's knife and later stabbed Waite with it.

"He figgered tuh make it easy fer 'im tuh rustle W-8 cattle, after th' brand would be in th' care o' a woman," Tom concluded. "But when yuh-all come a hellin' after me, leavin' the whole Limpin' River Valley roundup herd all in one spot an' without a guard, he figgered th' chance fer a single cleanup was too good tuh pass by."

A growl came from Hod Veckner,

who had shaken off the dizziness caused by the blow on his head, and was now standing up, guarded by the ready guns of three possemen.

"Yuh're lyin'!" he grated. "Tryin' tuh talk yoreself out o' a noose an' me intuh it! I admit I was runnin' off these steers, an' I'll plead guilty an' serve my stretch fer it. But I jest seen my chance an' took it. I didn't do no murder; an' yuh cain't prove it agin' me!"

AS he spoke, Tom was eyeing him closely. At length his face cleared. He turned to the sheriff.

"Did yuh notice, Sheriff," he asked, "that when Hod was standin' there talkin' he was restin' all his weight on one foot an' trailin' th' other in th' dust sideways? Look down there at th' dust. See them spur marks? Three lines, an' th' middle one is shorter than th' others? That's because one spur is half broke off. It don't ketch th' dust until th' foot has been drug a inch er so. An' it quits makin' its mark afore th' others have lifted out o' th' dust when he stops draggin' that foot."

"Well, what about it?" The interested possemen examined the marks in the dust. Tom faced them triumphantly.

"After I'd managed tuh drop you men," he stated, "I come straight tuh where Callum Waite was kilt, t' have a look at th' evidence." He waved his arm back along the trail around the base of Thunder Mountain. "Back in th' gap, I found all th' dust sign o' th' murder. An' there's four separate places where th' hombre who stood talkin' with Waite an' afterward stabbed 'im stood on one foot an' dragged th' other. In three places, there was sign of th' broken spur. In th' other, there's th' piece o' spur that broke off! I'm bettin' it'll fit right on to that place where Hod has a spur broke off!"

He pointed down to Veckner's rowel. One spur was broken off halfway up to the base. Veckner paled.

"Lies!" he shouted. "He's found that broken piece somewheres, an' is buildin' up a lie t' make it look like evidence agin' me!"

Tom faced him squarely, his sun-faded old eyes meeting the other man's unblinkingly.

"Th' broken spur is still up there in that track," he stated positively. "An' all th' sheriff has tuh do tuh know I'm speakin' truth is jest go back there an' examine them tracks. It's plain tuh read th' hombre that made those spur lines stepped in an' stabbed Waite. Shall we mosey back in that direction?"

As he spoke, Hod Veckner's face had gone ghastly white, tinged with yellow. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. Finally, with a blurted oath, he reached quickly upward. His right hand dived in beneath his coat, came out with a hideout gun from an under-arm holster.

"Damn yuh!" he screamed. "Damn yuh, I'll take yuh to hell along with me!"

But Eddie McLean had been watching Veckner's hands, watching them to the exclusion of all else. When the murderer moved, Eddie's hands went into a blur of motion. His guns leaped from their holsters. And by the time Hod Veckner's hideout gun had emerged from beneath the coat lapel, four shots from Eddie's guns had crashed into Hod Veckner's chest. The gun dropped from the murderer's hand, and he crumpled slowly to the ground.

"That's from Jean Waite, tuh pay for her murdered daddy," Eddie growled, holstering his smoking guns.

Silence held for a moment, that silence which always falls on a crowd when death has suddenly come into their midst. Then Tom turned to the sheriff.

"I reckon that proves it, Sheriff. He didn't see no use in goin' back tuh Limpin' River Gap tuh face that evidence."

Sheriff Doak nodded. "It clears yuh all right, Tom. But it's lucky that yuh left that broken spur lay where yuh found it. Jest like Hod

Veckner said, comin' from a murder suspect it wouldn't mean nothin' if yuh had jest pulled that spur out o' a pocket, an' didn't have no lines in th' dust tuh back up yore story."

Tom grinned. He dipped two fingers into his vest pocket. They came out with a broken spur point.

"Like I was sayin', Sheriff," he chuckled, "when I looked over th' evidence, I was believin' that Eddie done th' killin', because I'd lent him my knife. So when I found this, I jest picked it up. An' I stomped all over them broken spur tracks. There ain't a single one o' 'em left yonder in th' Gap!"

A gasp went up from the assembled possemen. Tom turned on them with a frown.

"What're yuh all still hangin' around here fer?" he demanded. "Ain't there a whole stampeded herd tuh be rounded up afore night?"

A laugh went up. An explosive laugh which gave vent to pent-up feelings that had been vastly moved at this spectacle of an innocent man saving himself from the noose by the exercise of sheer wits and courage.

An old rancher stepped in and took Tom's hand. "I'd call it a brand new way o' clearin' yorese'f o' th' charge o' murder, neighbor," he rumbled. "Fust yuh practically confess guilt by runnin' away. Then yuh completely destroy all th' evidence against th' real murderer!"

With a chuckle, he swung into the saddle of the horse which one of his men was holding for him. Then they lined out toward the north and the Limping River Valley herd.

THE TRAIL HERD

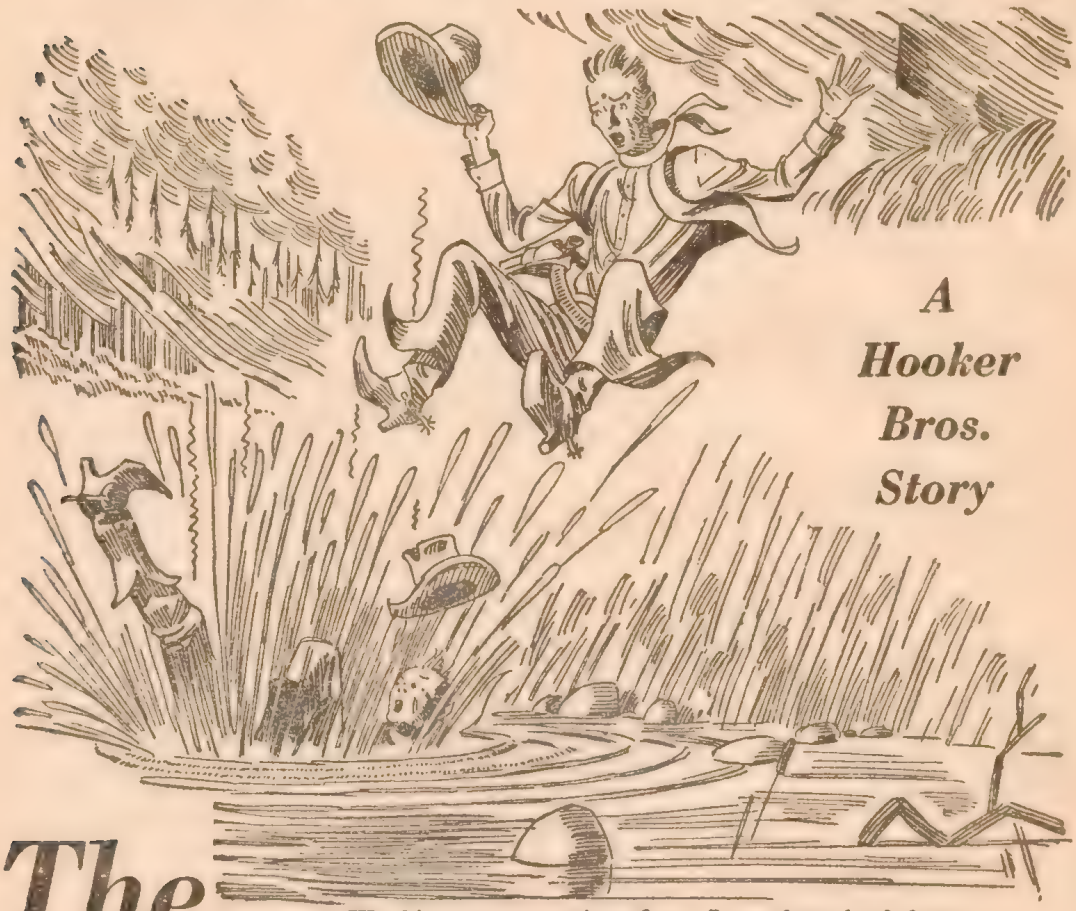
Bawlin' cattle a-kickin' up dust—
Ain't seen water since yesterday;
Git th' herd through or we'll go bust—
Keep them beeves a-movin' all th' way!

Look out fer rustlers a-gunning th' trail,
Have yore Colts ready tuh deal 'em lead;
Ain't no time fer th' sheriff or jail,
Them sidewindin' varmints is better off dead.

Watch out for a scare that'll start a stampede,
Got tuh be keerful—it's twenty miles yet;
There's always dangers a feller should heed—
Bring 'em through safe? Hell, do yuh wanta bet?

—TEX MUMFORD.

The Well Known Hooker Gumption Goes to Bat with Forest Flames and Johnny Ketches a Swift an' Painful Fryin' Where He Don't Wear Chaps!



A Hooker Bros. Story

We hits the water feet first. I can hear both boots sizzling all the way t' the bottom

The FIRE EATERS

By GRANT TAYLOR

Author of "Easy Money," "Nature in the Raw," etc.

IT'S lucky that me, Johnny Hooker, senior member o' the Hooker Bros. cow firm here in Canyon Lobo, is here to do all the thinkin' f'r this outfit. If I wasn't, the Government would jest have that coot li'l brother Stevie o' mine an' them cowyaps o' our'n "One-Ton" Benson an' Pablo and old George, tuh feed. An' onct them no-'count saddle bums got their hooks fastened on some free chuck, it'd take the whole Army an' part o' the Navy tuh pry 'em loose.

Take my li'l brother Stevie what partners it here with me in everything 'cept the work, I'd like tuh see him exercise that lump he carries

'round 'tween his ears for something 'sides tryin' tuh figger out what old George is havin' fer supper. We shore c'n use a li'l brain work. All this here dry weather is curlin' up the grass an' dryin' up the water holes, but it don't mean nuthin' tuh Stevie.

That pinhead, he figgers them water holes o' ours is all filled up from the bottom, 'til they git so low he c'n see they ain't no pipe in 'em connectin' tuh the ocean. With the water holes dry an' the grass so dead it's bustin' off at the roots, all a-sudden he starts gittin' all excited.

"We'll all be ruint," he wails. "We got tuh git our cows outa here, an' they ain't no place tuh take 'em."

"They shore wouldn't be if it was left t' you," I bawls. "What yuh think I been settin' an' worryin' 'bout fer a month back?"

"I ain't noticin' the worryin', but I shore been noticin' the settin'," says my li'l brother with a horse-laugh.

THAT'S the way it is: no credit t' me when I frets grey hairs intuh my head handlin' these big, overgrowed emergencies what comes lopin' along on a cow ranch.

"No place to take 'em, hey?" I says. "That's what *you* think. Me, I got a place, and what's more, we start gatherin' 'em tomorrer. Goin' tuh push 'em up tuh the rim country where they's scads o' grass and water."

"Yuh will like hell!" yelps Stevie. "That's Government range, an' yuh got tuh have a permit from the forust ranger."

"Which same I got," I states, pawin' around in a bunch o' old papers 'til I fish out one o' these big Government envelopes what don't need no stamps tuh travel in the mail. "Here she is," I announces, swellin' up all same as a sourdough flapjack. "The right tuh run cows on the Chiricaheela National Forust from June fu'st tuh November fu'st, signed by the wagon boss o' the Forust Service. Let that piece o' headwork soak intuh yuh, yuh poor unedicated cow-chasers. Whatever I want, I builds a loop an' goes after."

"Lemme see that permit," says our cook, old George, wipin' his specs off on the dish towel. "Last time I run cows on the forust, I rode herd on more fires 'n' I did on cows." An' he starts readin' all the li'l fine print which don't mean nuthin'.

"Jest like I thought," he orates. "It says here yuh got tuh help fight forust fires, goin' an' comin', an' with me it'd be mostly goin'. Last time I helped fight fire I lost more hair 'n ever growed back. I'd ruther run cows on the desert.

"Says you," I bawls at that. "Allus bellyachin'. Unwillin' tuh give me credit fer brain work. Who's afraid of a li'l smoke? Tomorrer me and One-Ton gits a pack outfit an' heads up tuh high country t' pick out the best grazin', while Stevie an' Pablo starts gatherin' them dogies. And o' course we're willin' to help fight forust fires. It's our patriotic duty, specially as we'll have cows up there. The ranger give me a bunch o' shovels an' axes and sech-like, and me an' One-Ton'll pack 'em with us. We'll load up that ol' hammerheaded grey outlaw an' bust him in tuh pack."

That's the way Johnny Hooker is. Allus usin' my bean. Lookin' ahead. Makin' no lost motions.

Old George sticks his head out the door and looks at the sky. "She's a-stormin' up fer trouble," he predicts. "Goin' up intuh forust range when she's dry as she is, an' packin' that ol' grey hammerhead on top."

Me, I don't pay no mind to them cold-water throwers. New York and Chicago would still be nuthin' but Injun wickiup towns if this outfit o' cold-water throwers had been workin' for Columbus.

Next mornin' we drive the remuda intuh the corals, an' I drop a loop over the ol' grey buzzard's head. Right then things begins t' tighten up. Fu'st thing he does is r'ar up an' wrop one front foot 'round the rope. Then he swaps ends an' lands straddle o' it, after which he starts

leadin' me an' my pony around, 'stead o' me leadin' him.

"C'mere!" I bawls at Stevie and our big hand, One-Ton. "Toss yore twine on this knothead an' help me git him unwound."

"Cripes, Johnny," bellers One-Ton, "why pack that he-devil? We can't even ride 'im."

"Which ain't sayin' he can't be packed," I yelps. "Nuthin' stays on this ranch what don't work, 'cept forty-dollar cowhands. Snare 'im!"

One-Ton piles his loop on that hunk o' lion meat an' we drag 'im out. We got tuh tie one hind foot up in his ear 'fore we can even git a hackamore on 'im.

"Jest like a fool Hooker," mutters One-Ton, "tuh git a notion tuh wrastle a dang old hammerhead outlaw when we got a range full o' good pack horses. How yuh figger tuh pack them long-handled shovels an' garden rakes which that forust ranger sawed off on us fer fire-fightin' tools?"

"Leave it tuh me," I tells him. "When it comes tuh packin', I come intuh this world done up in a double diamond hitch. When I'm done with this ol' crowbait, he'll be done up all same as a Christmas package."

It might be hard fer some to pack up shovels and rakes with chuck an' a cookin' outfit, but not fer Johnny Hooker. I got that ol' buzzard cinched up so tight he ain't got no more belly 'n a wasp, and there he is, grub, beds and shovels, et cetery. Me an' One-Ton prepares tuh take off up country, leavin' Stevie an' Pablo an' old George to lope off gatherin' our cows.

"She's a-cloudin' up fer trouble," moans ol' George jest before we rides off. "Any damn' fool would know the Government don't let no cows up on forust range till they figger they need a lot o' help fightin' fires."

"Aw, dry up," I hollers back. "If yuh'd been around here back in the Bible days when the Lord was makin' the stars and moon, he'd of quit the fu'st day."

Everything goes fine with me and One-Ton and the old hammerhead until we top Calamity Ridge an' start down t' other side. The trail is so steep yuh c'd spit halfway down the mountain, an' the brush is thicker'n hair on a range-wintered dogie. Halfway down that old knothead I packed runs up straddle a brush what's got a hornets' nest in it. About 1800 o' them bald-head bugs ram their stingers in that horse plumb up tuh their eyes, and things begin tuh happen.

Fu'st jump he makes, he runs a hind foot through a pack loop, an' then goes buckin' an' bawlin' down the trail.

"Head 'im off!" I bellers at One-Ton. "Ketch that dang outlaw!"

"KETCH hell an' git scorched," bawls One-Ton. "I ain't ridin' no locomotive."

About that time my old horse Ranger ketches one o' them hornets right 'tween the hind legs. I was ridin' along kind o' easy-like with one foot out o' the stirrup, an' the fu'st jump he makes, I'll be danged if he don't run a hind foot right through that stirrup. Which, with Johnny Hooker, when any hoss decides tuh git on, it's time f'r me tuh be gittin' off, which I does, landin' right where they ain't nothin' gives but parts o' me.

Down the trail that locoed bronc is tryin' tuh buck straight down the mountain. What with the more'n 150 pounds o' chuck, shovels an' rakes an' the cookin' outfit he's packin', ev'ry time he jumps up two foot, he goes down all of ten. Next thing that heavy pack rams his head into the ground, after which he starts rollin'.

Gran Quivera! Things begin tuh fly. Our big coffee pot goes sailin' off with a shovel handle stickin' through the bottom. A pair o' Dutch ovens turns loose, an' one sails up in the air to come down bottom up on that ol' horse's head. He wears it like a hat fer a minute until the handle slips down over his neck, where he's wearin' it all same as a necklace.

Our sack o' beans follers, eruptin' like hail on a tin roof. "Hey, do somethin'!" I bellers from where I'm settin', an' looks around f'r One-Ton. I'm twin brother tuh a horntoad if that big hunk o' sour cheese ain't rollin' on the ground, laughin' like a hyena.

"I ain't laughed so much since the time yuh got licked by a sheepherder," he says.

"Is that so?" I growls, castin' around f'r a good hard rock tuh bounce off'n him. "C'mon, head that damn' fool 'fore he loses all our chuck."

IT ain't necessary. We find him below, piled up in the crick, with both hind feet run through the pack cinch, and rakes, hoes an' shovels stickin' out from him like pins outa a cushion. The lid has busted off our can o' bakin' powder an' mixed in with water an' a busted can o' molasses, an' the whole dang' mess is foamin' an' stewin' worse'n a pot o' old George's sourdough.

We wade in an' cut the handle off our Dutch oven to git it from that dang' ol' outlaw's neck, an' gits what ain't ruint all tied on ag'in an' start foggin' it up tuh high country. A li'l thing like that don't stir up me any; take the bad with the good, that's my motter.

By evenin' we gits up to Laughin' Squaw Crick, where the grass is knee-high tuh a tall Injun an' the trees so doggoned lofty yuh have tuh look twicet t' see the tops.

We make some coffee in a can, and then we all turns in. Me, I'm so dang tired I jest fall intuh bed with my head under me. Seems like I ain't no more'n tuh sleep 'til I'm dreamin' I'm a buck Injun lopin' around tryin' tuh make smoke signals, an' ev'rytime I flop the blanket, the smoke comes back in my face. Fin'ly I gits mad and kicks the blanket in the fire.

"Hey, what the—" bellers One-Ton, settin' up and clawin' at the blankets I been pilin' on his head. Me, as I come outa that dream, I realize all a-sudden part o' it's real. I'm suckin' in a whole bellyful of shore-'nough smoke. Goddlemighty, we're in the middle of a smoke fog so thick yuh could cut slices out o' it with a dull butcher knife.

"Come alive!" I bawls at One-Ton. "Grab yore bronc an' le's git out o' here 'fore we git all fried harder'n saddle leather."

"Jest as old George said," gripes One-Ton as he yanks his boots on. "It started cloudin' up f'r trouble when yuh started all this. If yuh'd lissen to that wise old owl, yuh'd live a sight longer."

"Shut up an' saddle up!" I bawls. "Leave our chuck an' beds behind. Turn that ol' hammerhead loose an' let 'im save hisself."

Time we're ready t' start steppin' on our mounts, there's a yell down the trail and the Forust Ranger comes lopin' up with about 14 other hombres.

"Grab yore rakes an' shovels, you fellas, an' foller me!" he hollers. "Fire over on Truchas Peak."

"Jist as old George said," says One-Ton. "Drafted intuh a fire-fightin' brigade 'fore we even git a cow up here. Tell him yuh decided to cancel that permit."

"Cancel nuthin'," I says. "Yuh unpatriotic slackers, we can't let our Uncle Sammy's forust burn up!"

We piles on our horses an' take out after that ranger as he leads the way through the smoke an' timber an' brush, spurrin' his horse an' jumpin' down logs an' boulders big as a cabin. I git both kneecaps knocked around on the side o' my laigs bumpin' into big trees in the smoke, but Johnny Hooker ain't no quitter. We climb straight up one mountain an' slide down the other side, then we take off across a mesa, tearin' down more li'l trees than a tree army c'd plant in a year.

The smoke's so thick it's darker'n a cave at midnight, and we got t' ride to keep up with that forust ranger gang, 'cause if we git lost, we'd shore never find our way out.

Up at the fire, which this ranger smells out all same as a bloodhound, he has our horses took off t' a safe

place while he sets us shovelin' an' diggin' what he calls a fire guard, which is jest a lot o' work to us. From the way that slave-drivin' forust guy works us, yuh'd think he owned that Chiricaheela Forust personal.

In five minits the sweat is rollin' off all o' us enough to put out ten forust fires, but as the hours pass that ranger only yells fer us to use them rakes an' shovels more strenyous.

Fin'ly me an' One-Ton, we ketch the ranger when he ain't lookin' an' set down tuh ketch our breath. I figgers they ain't no harm in grabbin' off a li'l shut-eye for a few seconds, an' I reclines my head ag'in a log. I ain't no more'n jest got my eyes shut when somebody sticks a red-hot pitchfork right into a soft spot. I wake up, brushin' off sparks. *Gran Quivera!* While me an' One-Ton has been snoozin' that dang fire has slipped up an' got us corraled.

Ev'ry way I look they ain't nothin' but smoke an' fire. Ashes an' sparks git caught in the wind an' swirl up tuh land half a mile away. Big trees blaze up an' bust, sendin' a shower o' sparks in seventeen diff'rent directions.

I see I got tuh act quick, else the cowfolks'll all be tellin' about how a couple o' fire-fightin' heroes died a noble death. Which I ain't cravin' tuh be, 'specially no cooked hero.

I bawls at One-Ton and leads the way outa there, huntin' a place tuh git through the fire. We ain't gone through more'n a hunderd foot when we run right up ag'in a bull elk an' all his harem. With them is a pair of wildcats an' some deer, all millin' around huntin' a openin'. Fin'ly the wind changes an' we all stampede down off'n the mountain. I got both boots full o' hot ashes, but they ain't a li'l thing like that goin' tuh bother Johnny Hooker in sech emergencies.

We passes a few o' the animils, workin' our legs an' flattenin' out brush ontil I open my eyes tuh find out my legs is still workin' but they ain't nothin' tuh work on no more. We run straight off a cliff 20 foot high, at the bottom of which, luckily, is a li'l lake. We hits that water feet first, an' I can hear both boots sizzlin' all the way t' the bottom.

Wadin' outa there, we find that dang fire has jumped around ag'in, headin' us off, so me an' One-Ton got t' head up the mountain ag'in. We busts all the mountain climbin' records, with the flames cracklin' loud behind us.

Up ahead is a li'l open space, and in it is a tall tower, the ranger's look-out, which is a steel contraption about 100 foot high with a ladder runnin' up tuh a li'l house settin' on top. It's right there I figger out a way tuh beat that fire.

"We're saved!" I bawls at One-Ton. "We'll climb this here thing an' lay low."

"Climb that!" bellers One-Ton. "What yuh take me for—a dang monkey with a dang tail?"

ME, I don't hesitate none. Flames is cracklin' off in the brush, and I grabs a holt o' that ladder an' begins tuh climb right up through the smoke. Seems like I been climbin' f'r a week when, as the wind blows away the fog, I decides t' take a look down. Sufferin' sidewinders! I'm at least 1,000 foot above the ground, up among the tops of the tall trees.

They ain't nothin' that ever fazed Johnny Hooker, but about that time my stomach begins tuh feel mighty funny, an' I notices all them trees below is doin' a shimmy. I realize I must be sufferin' from a kinda dizzy spell, but with my usual presents of mind, I shut my eyes an' hook a spur over a rung in that ladder, freezin' tuh that dang ladder tighter'n a woodtick tuh a yearlin' sheep.

By swallerin' fast I manage tuh keep my cussed stomach from crawlin' up my guzzel an' jumpin' out through my mouth.

There's a yelp right below me an', "Outa the way, damn' it!" says a voice behind me. "Look up, yuh damn' fool; don't look down!"

One-Ton has decided to foller me

after all, and the hurry he's in there must be a cinder burnin' in his pants. Kind o' weak and shook up, I eases myself up the ladder, and reachin' the top, falls in through a li'l door tuh the tin house some locoed fool has built on top o' this crazy layout. I lays there on the floor pantin' an' heavin', and One-Ton flops beside me.

"Yuh would graze cows on a forust," grunts One-Ton. "An' volunteer tuh fight fires."

PURTY soon I gits up tuh have a look around. There's a big telescope settin' on a li'l table an' a whole mess o' maps an' things, which I ain't none interested in. I c'n see plenty without no telescope. The shack on top that tower ain't nothin' but a bunch o' winders with a roof on 'em. I figger a feller could set in the chair an' see acrost four states and a coupla territories and down to Durango, Mexico, with one look. I ease over an' take a li'l squint down.

Gran Quivera! Seems like we're more'n 10,000 foot above everything. Them tall trees ain't nothin' but li'l saplin's. They built this fool contraption on top o' the highest peak in the whole dang country an' tied it down with four big cables runnin' out among the trees tuh keep it from blowin' away.

One-Ton stands up there, and I c'n hear him breathin' beside me as he looks down all that distance. Then I hear a loud thump. One-Ton has hit the floor in a dead faint.

"They'll never git me outa this place," says One-Ton when he comes to. "Goddlemighty, I'll never climb down that; they gotta build a elevator tuh take me down."

Whirrrr-rr-erp! Somethin' goes off right behind us, an' I dang near jumped outa the winder. I yanks my ol' gun, figgerin' mebbe a rattler has climbed up here, too. But it's one o' them new-fangled tleyphones. Well, they ain't no calls I'm expectin' from no lady friends; it's prob'ly from St. Peter askin' what we're doin' up so close t' the Pearly Gates.

It keeps on buzzin', an' I git tuh thinkin' mebbe I better see what it wants. I ease the li'l jigger off the hook and right away there's a hollerin' in my ear.

"Hello, hello, whozit?" says a voice what belongs to the forust ranger.

"Me, Johnny Hooker," I hollers right back, "head o' the cow firm o'—"

"Where's the lookout?" he cuts me off. "What you doin' up there, Hooker? Why ain't you down here fightin' fire? What made you run off? Where's the lookout, hey?"

"I dunno," I says. "He prob'ly had more sense than tuh stay here. How about rescuin' us from this place?"

He busts out swearin', an' I guess that fire he's watchin' jumped off ag'in, for there's a click near bustin' my ear, so I slam the dang do-jigger back on the hook.

It's gittin' daylight by now, and a wind is comin' up, blowin' off the smoke. In half a hour she's blowin' hard 'nough tuh lift the hair off a wild hog. As she whistles around that tower, that thing starts swayin'. In a hour she's weavin' and twistin' worse'n a sunfishin' bronc. If one of the cables ever broke, we'd fall right outa the state.

It's rainin' off in the distance, moppin' out them forust fires, but the storm as she moves across grabs that tower and shakes it around like a dog with a snake in his teeth.

One-Ton he lets out a groan and lays on the floor actin' like he's seasick, an' I figger I better git outa there afore it hits me. I crawl tuh the door and look down. One look is aplenty. I figger I'll wait 'til that tower quits shimmyin'.

"Tell 'er to stop f'r jest one second," groans One-Ton from the floor.

I don't say nothin', only shuts the door and lays down alongside him, helpin' him groan. The rain she begins to zizz down, while the tower keeps swappin' ends an' turnin' somersaults, an' the thunder is boomin' over us.

Then all of a sudden, *wham! BANG! Zizzzz-zip!* A streak of

lightnin' bounces off the roof o' that li'l dog house an' hightails it down one o' them cables tuh the ground. Holy pet'erfied terrapins!

Right after that the lightnin' starts playin' steady, whippin' up one o' them cables an' slidin' down another. I guess they ain't no danger; the Government would know what they was doin' when they built this thing fer a ranger to live in. But it's luck Johnny Hooker has got a iron nerve or else I'd 'a' clumb down that ladder head fu'st. One good thing, it shore cures us both of bein' seasick.

BOOM! Zizzzz-zing! Two balls o' fire bigger'n old George's washtub comes chasin' each other up one o' them cables right smack intuh the li'l house, an' right over that an' down the other side.

ONE-TON jumps to his feet. "Goddlemighty!" he yells. "Ain't they something else yuh can git me intuh? Yuh ain't satisfied tuh stay down on the flats with yore old cows, hey? Yuh got tuh git me electercouted on top. I'm gittin' outa this."

"Go on," I bellers. "There wasn't nothin' in that permit callin' for us to stay up in a dog tower and dodge lightnin' in a li'l ol' room what ain't big enough tuh cuss a cat without gittin' hairs in yore teeth."

One-Ton opens the door and looks down, and he looks kinda green as he looks on the treetops wavin' around below.

"Huh!" he says. "Mebbe after all, might as well wait 'til the storm is over." Then he hops over sudden and grabs me around the neck. A ball o' lightnin' comes in and plays around the room.

"Great Goddlemighty! We'll be 'lectrocuted an' smoked jest like a damn' herrin'!" he yells. "Wait 'til I git yuh on the ground. Do something. Call up that ranger an' tell him if he wants us t' be alive so's we kin fight any more fires, tuh git us out'n here. No, me, I'll call him up m'self."

One-Ton pulls the do-jigger off the hook and sticks it up ag'in his ear. A streak of fire three foot long jumps out o' that blamed thing and whaps One-Ton so dang hard he skids acrost the room, bangs up ag'in a wall, an' bounces back ag'in the table.

I figgers I better step forward and hang up that do-jigger so's to keep out more streaks o' fire, but the minit I picks it up, *wham!* A mule inside o' there blazes away, an' when I wake up I'm under the table with one spur hooked up in a winder an' the dang telescope stickin' down a boot leg.

One-Ton he's backin' hisself outa the door what leads to the ladder. "G'by, Johnny," he says. "I'm gittin' down. I had all I wanted of this here. I don't aim to be electercuted for a murder I never done. Yuh kin stay if yuh want to. I'm gittin' outa here if I gotta jump."

"Yuh dang quitter," I bawls, "come back here. Us Hookers don't run from nothin'. Hey, One-Ton," I says, as his head disappears, "come back. I wouldn't go down that damn' ladder for a thousand dollars. Yuh shore ain't goin' t' leave me. Stick here with me, One-Ton. This storm

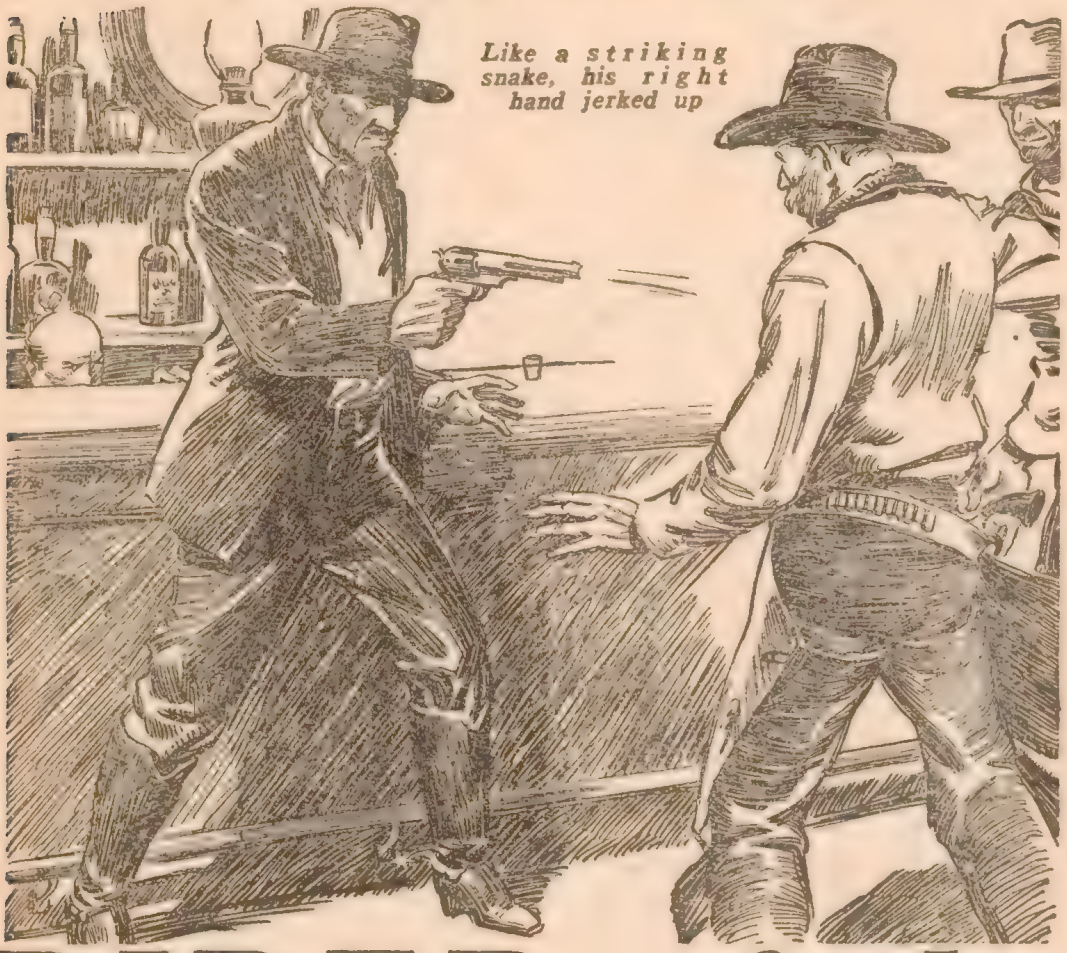
(Continued on page 127)

How Well Do You Know Your West?

Try to answer these five questions. If you can't savvy 'em, turn to the answers on page 124. But try first!

1. Who was the first captain of the Texas Rangers?
2. With what tribe were the Comanches joined in a confederacy?
3. What Ranger was known as the "riot buster"?
4. Was William H. Bonney (Billy the Kid) born in the West?
5. What were "Croppies"?

Jim Lake Adopts the Name and the Game of a Notorious Gunman to Aid the Fight of Colt-Filled Hands Against Craven Killers!



RIDER *of the* RIM-ROCK

By LARRY A. HARRIS

Author of "Three Gun-Devils," "The Devil's Disciple," etc.

BODY jerking rigid in the kak, Jim Lake slithered his sweat-streaked bronc to a halt. In the trail just ahead lay a man, back turned, grey with wind-blown sand—dead.

Grey eyes quizzical, Lake dismounted. His boot heels crunched noisily as he strode toward the body. His right hand hovered warily near one of the black-butted Colts thonged low on his leg.

Face grim, he hesitated over the body. Then slowly he touched the

dead man's shoulder, moved the body about.

Between the eyes of the dead man was a small, bluish hole.

"God!" Lake whispered. "It's—Danny!"

His voice was choked with bitterness. He stared fixedly at the set features of the dead man. Stared with cold, unseeing eyes through a growing red haze. To the dead man Jim Lake was an exact counterpart. The dead man could easily have been his twin.

Lake searched the man's pockets. From a shirt he produced a folded slip of paper, sweat-stained and soiled. Lake unfolded it. Through a blur he read the pencil scribbling.

I am sending this note by a Spic that said he could find you, Kid. When you get this, ride straight north by yourself for San Saba. Look me up. I've got a deal that will corral us both plenty of *dinero* and you don't need to shy at the law. I'm it. Colt Craver.

Lake rose stiffly to his feet. His lean fingers clenched tightly, crushing the note.

"I'll square things, Danny," he promised, "if it takes my whole life. I'll kill him! I ain't Jim Lake no more now. Me—I'm Kid Cabras—*killer!*" Vibrant, hate-filled, his voice rang out in the quiet of the growing dusk. His fist rose skyward. His lips moved again in whispered vengeance.

As a man does an unpleasant task, Jim Lake went to work. With his hands he dug a shallow hole in the sand beside the trail and buried the body. There was no ceremony—no display of emotion. Instead he worked silently in the purple-shadowed desert. Only the crunch of his boot heels disturbed the stillness.

After the mound was patted down he placed rocks over the grave. That was all. No cross. No marker. Nothing but the mound of sand and rocks.

San Saba couldn't be over five miles away. It was almost dark when Lake swung into the saddle and pointed his bronc down the mesquite-rimmed trail. Straight-backed, grimly purposeful he rode, not once casting a backward glance at the rocky mound behind him.

NIGHT. San Saba. Tight-lipped, grey with dust, a rider jogged his bronc down the main street. Down the 'dobe-fronted town where darkened doorways and windows stood forbiddingly sinister, like the eyes of corpses against the grey of the walls.

Midway of the town the rider passed the main saloon. An oil lamp illuminated a sign above its batwing doors. It read, "Craver's Silver Dollar Saloon." Yellow light splashed through the dirty window panes into the street. Two double-gunned *hombres* in the shadows by the building watched the rider, whispered furtively, and eased inside.

Farther down the street at a livery stable the rider reined in his mount. Lantern in hand, a bandy-legged jasper waddled out, stared with quizzical, watery eyes into the rider's face.

It was Jim Lake.

"Howdy," the stableman grunted. He took the reins of Lake's bronc.

Lake nodded. "Stable an' feed," he said. "I may be needin' him *pronto*."

Eyes shrewd, the oldster surveyed Lake's lean, muscular figure.

"Yuh're a stranger," he said abruptly. "Th' town's funny 'bout strangers nowadays. Th' bank was stuck up last night. Thought yuh might wanna know. Everyone's plumb skittery."

"Stick-up?"

The old man spat to one side, nodded.

"Yeah," he confided. "They say it was Kid Cabras an' his Border hoppers."

"Kid Cabras," Lake said levelly, "didn't rob any bank—not last night!"

"Shore, I know it. Shore, Kid Cabras is bad, stranger. But," the oldster whispered, "he ain't ary whit worse'n some gents in this town who are s'posed tuh be—"

"Could th' gent," Lake interrupted,

"that runs th' Silver Dollar Saloon be—Colt Craver?"

The older man's eyes widened. "Shore," he mumbled, puzzlement in his voice. "Shore, Colt Craver runs th' Silver Dollar. Runs th' whole town."

Lake murmured, "He's th' gent." Caressingly, his right hand brushed the butt of his gun. Then he moved away.

The old stableman stared at him. Then with sudden resolve he hobbled hurriedly to Lake's side.

"Kelly's my name, feller," he offered. "I've seen plenty hell in my time. Yuh cain't fool me—yuh're gunnin' for Craver, feller. I don't mind tellin' yuh, mister, Colt Craver's pizen, suh. He's robbed me. He's ruined th' whole town an' we cain't do nothin' about it. He's got guns—an' he's fast—faster'n hell! Yore war ain't mine, stranger, but if yuh *are* buckin' Craver, let me know. I wanna he'p." His voice was bitter.

"I'll remember," Lake said.

WITH the stiff stride of a saddleman, Lake walked down the street toward the Silver Dollar Saloon. Through the batwing doors he stepped into the smoke-filled room, where a dozen hard-eyed *hombres* flayed him with their glances. At the bar he ordered a drink from a beetle-browed barkeep.

Two men down the bar were arguing. Sudden quiet gripped the room in an onminous hush.

"I'm gonna kill yuh, Morgan," a voice thundered. "I'm gonna kill yuh jest as shore as hell!"

Lake flashed a swift glance at the speaker, a thick-chested, beady-eyed gent wearing tight black boots and store clothes, whose thick lips leered smirkingly at a smaller man opposite him—obviously a rancher.

"We might as well settle matters now!" the rancher blazed. "Yuh're a skunk, every inch of yuh, an' nobody's got th' gumption to tell yuh so. *I* will! Hear me?" he defied hoarsely. "Yuh've cleaned out my herds. Yuh're gettin' everything in yore filthy hands—even th' water holes. An' as fer th' bank— you know who done that, Craver!"

Through clenched teeth a *hombre* in the room exhaled sighingly. A dozen hands snaked gunward. Craver's lips twisted into a mirthless grin.

"Yuh ready, Morgan?" he taunted. "I'm gonna give yuh a chanct."

Grimly defiant, the rancher nodded. "Yeah," he gritted. "I'm ready." His voice was calm now, hate-filled.

"I'll count three," Craver grated.

Again the rancher nodded. Craver didn't move. His long white fingers hung limply at his side.

"One—two—"

Half crouching, right hand twitching over his gun-butt, the rancher watched Craver's lips. The big gent pursed his lips to call three. Instead, like a striking snake, his right hand flashed beneath his coat, jerked up, spewed flame into the rancher's chest.

Eyes bulging, the cowman stared, choked a curse at Craver who had never counted three. He swayed drunkenly his face convulsed in pain. His body shuddered. His gun dangled from stiff fingers. Then suddenly, knees buckling, he fell to the floor.

No one in the room moved. Craver slowly sheathed his gun. He smiled thinly as the batwing doors slapped open. Black eyes nervous, a booted, double-gunned gent stopped just inside, glanced about the room, then quickly stepped forward beside the body on the floor.

"He insulted me, Sheriff," Craver explained coolly. "He called me a crook, then couldn't back it up with his guns. I give him a chanct. I called three an' then shot him."

Blinking owlishly, the sheriff's shifty eyes flicked to Craver. "I believe yuh, Craver," he gobbled. "Morgan's been warned 'bout accusin' gents uh bein' crooks an' thieves." He shook his head with mock gravity. "I reckon he had it comin'."

Craver sighed. "Yeah, Sheriff. He had it comin'." He waved over the room. "I think these gents will back what I say."

"Shore," one hombre yessed throatily. "Craver gave him a chance. He counted three."

Other heads nodded. One onlooker coughed. A boot heel scraped on the plank floor.

"Gents—tuh my way o' hearin'—th' countin' quit at *two!*"

Craver whirled, the smile on his face fading. Surprised, the sheriff jerked about. They came like a bombshell, those words. Yet Lake's voice was soft, purring.

Thunderstruck, Craver lunged forward, his face distorted with rage. Twenty pairs of hands among the gunslick crew dived holsterward to back up their *jefe.*

Lake laughed. It sounded rasplike, unpleasant. His lips smiled but his eyes didn't. And as if by magic those guns which had been at his hips a moment before now swayed over the room, waist-high, in fists like steel. Body bent slightly forward, his frostbitten eyes swept the group. Trick draw! Too fast for the eye to follow. Just the swish of steel as it left the oiled holsters. Only his wrist and fingers moved.

The gunhawks in the room stared, stricken dumb, growing respect in their slit eyes. They'd heard of that draw, those men, but they'd never seen it. Only one man pulled iron like that in the crooked river country—Kid Cabras!

Colt Craver tottered on boot toes, face grey. His eyes dropped to the sightless guns that covered him. Killer's guns!

"Kid Cabras!" Craver breathed, awe-struck.

"Yuh said yuh wanted tuh see me, Craver," Lake taunted softly. "Didn't yuh, Craver?"

Hands of the other hombres in the room didn't snake gunward now. They eased skyward. The sheriff's jaw dropped. Craver's green-flecked eyes shuttled nervously about the room, then turned to Jim Lake.

"Hell, feller," he blustered, "this ain't no cause for *us* tuh go on th' prod. We wanna *habla* with yuh. Me an' th' sheriff wanna talk."

Beeman, the sheriff, cleared his throat. "Shore, that's it, mister," he wheedled. He turned to two of Craver's men. "Tote him," he ordered, nodding to the rancher's body, "tuh th' outside an' tell his kin."

Lake's eyes darted from the sheriff back to Craver. Slowly he holstered his guns.

"*Bueno,* Craver," he said. "I'll listen tuh yore talk."

Relief on his thick-jowled face, Craver turned, motioned Beeman to follow, and strode lumberingly toward the rear of the bar. In the deathly quiet his silver-mounted spurs tinkled musically. Like a stalking panther, Jim Lake followed them, eyes frosty, inscrutable, freezing on Craver's back.

Over a rear door was a sign. It read, "Private Office." As Lake stepped through the doorway, Craver eased behind him and closed the door on a dozen pairs of speculative eyes in the barroom.

IN the rear room of Colt Craver's Silver Dollar Saloon, Jim Lake, Beeman, the sheriff, and Craver, sat around a rough hewn table. There was a bottle of *sotol,* three drinks poured.

Dish-faced, shaggy-browed Beeman sat, ill at ease, head lowered, scowling, beady eyes shifting about the room. He rubbed the palms of his pawlike hands together. It made an irritating, rasping noise.

Like stone was Colt Craver now. He reached for his tobacco. His movements were steady, deliberate. His battered, flat nose, glittering green eyes and scarred face somehow didn't correspond with his fingers. Fingers long and thin and white. Like a dead man's. Killer's fingers that could strike with the swiftness of a rattler in a gunplay showdown. Fast!

Craver touched a match to his quirley. He watched the smoke curl to the ceiling, face thoughtful.

"I've heard lots about yuh, Kid," he said. "That's why I sent for yuh. If we can make a deal we'll do wonders. For two good citizens like us tuh go on th' prod," he winked, "ain't

smart. Yuh got my note didn't yuh?" Craver's eyes narrowed on Lake's expressionless face.

Lake nodded, produced a folded piece of paper from his denim jacket. He handed it to Craver who glanced at its contents. It was the same note Craver had sent to Kid Cabras by a Mex rider.

"What's th' matter, Craver? Don't yuh know me?" Lake asked evenly.

Craver nodded quickly, reassuringly. "I've never seen yuh before," he said. "But I've shore heard lots about yore trick draw. Only Kid Cabras can flip iron from a holster like yuh did t'night. Yuh only moved yore wrists—"

"I couldn't *sabe,*" Lake interrupted, voice soft, "why yuh wanted tuh see me—alone."

Craver chuckled. Beeman fidgeted nervously in his chair. "Hell," Beeman growled impatiently, "let's git down tuh brass tacks. It's gittin' late."

Craver frowned. "*Bueno,* Sheriff," he purred. "We'll talk now." He turned to Lake. "I didn't need all yore riders tuh do th' work I got lined up, Cabras. Jest you is enough. Then—there was no need uh splittin' yore share uh th' profits a dozen ways. Yuh've likely heard I was proddin' for yuh, Kid, but it's a damn lie! This country is big enough for th' two uh us tuh work in without gunnin' for one another. Fact is, I need guns. Nerve and guns, thet's it."

His eyes shifted to Beeman significantly.

"I run th' town here, *sabe?* An' I'm like everybody else—I'm out for th' *dinero.*" He gulped down his *sotol* and poured another. He motioned the others to do the same. Beeman drank. Lake nodded, but didn't move.

Craver continued, eyes gleaming balefully. "I ain't gonna beat around th' bush, Kid. Last night"—he smirked—"last night th' bank was stuck up. The sheriff here swears yuh done it." He watched Lake's face closely. "He almost had tuh do it, Kid," he said gently; "tuh say it was you. Course it wasn't. But people woulda laid it onta yuh anyhow."

Lake nodded understandingly, grey eyes film-masked. "Yeah," he said slowly, "Kid Cabras gets blamed for a lot uh things he don't know about."

"Kid," Craver confided, "I don't mind tellin' yuh, my men—they got th' money outa thet bank. I got it here." He nodded to another room. "Part of it is yores by jest sayin' th' word—for not rarin' about us layin' th' blame o' th' bank deal onta yuh."

Beeman's brow corrugated. Worry on his face, he shot a swift, searching glance at Craver.

"I reckon," Lake said tonelessly, "yuh've already got th' money, yuh can have it, Craver. I aint' honin' for money."

CRAVER'S snake-eyes widened. "I s'pose yuh got all th' *dinero* yuh want, Kid," he said enviously. "*We* ain't! In thet case all th' money from th' bank goes tuh Beeman. He gits th' cash an' I—I git th' ranch. Th' gent who was plugged out in th' bar happened tuh own a spread I want, five miles east uh here. It's tuh be mine, *sabe?* It's th' B-Bar-B an' I've been keepin' my peepers on it fer years. They wouldn't sell, so I sent for yuh tuh come so we could smoke 'em out! I need yore guns!"

"Beeman gits th' bank money—*you* get th' ranch. What do *my* cards pay off, Craver?" Lake's voice was soft.

"You, Kid. Yuh git th' B-Bar-B herd. They's at least a thousand head an' they'll buy 'em *pronto* below th' Border. Yuh know thet. What do yuh say, Kid?"

"When do yuh ride, Craver? T'night?"

"T'night," Craver nodded. "They's only a couple o' old cowhands out there now. They won't be hard tuh run out. We'll ride t'night at twelve. An' listen, Kid. I want yuh tuh be careful with yore gunsmoke out there at th' ranch. There's a girl," he winked again suggestively, tapped

himself resoundingly on the chest. "She," he smirked, "is gonna be mine. We're gonna honeymoon below th' Border—in yore country, Kid."

Jim Lake studied the tips of his lean fingers. Then he rose, slit eyes turning to Craver.

"I'll ride," he said shortly. "*Adios*, gents, till later t'night."

Straight-backed and lithe, he strode across the room, opened the door and stepped into the bar outside. Craver's and Beeman's eyes followed Lake until the door closed in their faces and they heard his footsteps recede in the main bar.

Face clouding, Craver whirled angrily on Beeman. "Damn yuh, Beeman!" he stormed, "I'm gonna kill yuh! Yuh lied tuh me, didn't yuh? Yuh told me yuh potted Kid Cabras comin' intuh town." Hands twitching, Craver snaked them gunward.

Beeman shrank back in his chair. He licked his thin, dry lips. "I swear I thought I beefed th' Kid, Craver!" he panted. "I swear I told yuh th' truth. He wasn't over seventy-five yards away on th' trail. I seen him fall an' he dropped without a quiver. Gawd! I guess I ain't as steady as I used tuh be three-four years back."

Slowly Craver's hands eased from his gun. He scowled bitterly. "Beeman," he sneered, "yuh got th' nerve of a c'yote an' th' mind of a burro. If it hadn't been fer my thinkin' up thet lie about him goin' with us an' gittin' th' cattle—we'd both been measurin' space off on th' floor!"

"An' yuh—yuh mean this gent Cabras," Beeman stammered, relieved, "ain't gonna git th' herd?"

"Thet's it, Beeman," Craver snapped. "I ain't plumb *loco* yet! I want thet herd, th' girl an' th' ranch, an' I'm gonna git 'em! Kid Cabras is too powerful along th' Border. Thet's why I want him outa th' way. Me—Beeman—*I'm* gonna be cock uh th' walk or nothin', *sabe?* Colt Craver," he gloated, "Colt Craver—cock o' th' walk along th' Border. An' there won't be no law trailin' *me* like Kid Cabras, th' rimrocker. *I'll* be th' law!"

Eyes wide with respect, Beeman nodded, licking his chops. "Yuh shore will be th' law," he wheedled. "An' I'll back yuh tuh th' limit."

LEAVING Craver and Beeman in the office at the rear of the Silver Dollar Saloon, Jim Lake moved quick-strided through the bar. Swift, furtive glances from hard-eyed hombres in the room jerked from Lake to the office door. Then back again to Lake. A sudden hush swept the room.

Lake banged quickly out the batwing doors. Then, hurrying his stride even more, he made for the livery stable. As he came under the yellow light from the lantern over the livery door, the wizened little owner clumped out to meet him.

Lake nodded grimly, ordered his bronc. When it appeared, saddled and ready to travel, Lake paid the man and leaped into the saddle. There was a lot of unabashed respect in the red-whiskered oldster's eyes now as he stared up into Lake's face. No doubt but he'd heard about the incident in the Silver Dollar bar.

"Kid Cabras," he murmured softly, looking at Lake in the kak. "So yuh're Kid Cabras." Incredulity was in his voice.

"Yeah," Lake nodded. "I'm Kid Cabras—mebbe. Why?"

Shaking his grizzled head, the old stableman spat to one side. "Yuh'll excuse me, mister," he chirped, "but I could tell by yore eyes an' th' way yuh packed yore guns yuh warn't no cowpoke. But th' idee a skunk like Craver sayin' *yuh* stuck up th' bank last night! Why—"

"How d'yuh know I didn't, Kelly?" asked Lake.

Eyes snapping, Kelly leaned tensely forward. "Cause, Kid, *I seen who stuck up th' bank!*"

Lake eyed the old stableman speculatively. "Listen, Kelly," he said, "I believe I can trust yuh. I'm layin' my chips on yuh gettin' a note through tuh Pecos for me—t'night—

pronto!" Lake fumbled quickly through his pockets. He produced a pencil and an old empty envelope. In the dim light he scribbled a few brief words, then handed the note to the old man.

"This goes," Lake said hurriedly, "to a gent in Pecos—Clay Bartle. Everybody there knows him. Will yuh ride?"

Eyes gleaming, the old man nodded. "Yuh dam' whoopin' I'll ride, fella!" he exclaimed.

Leaning forward in his kak, Lake touched the spurs to his mount and pounded furiously out of town. Puzzlement in his eyes, Kelly stared after him until rider and horse were swallowed up in the night.

Slowly, almost unconsciously, he unfolded the note Lake had handed him to deliver. As he read it his eyes widened, jaw sagging with wonderment.

He gasped. "Twelve o'clock t'-night! Must be nine now. Jumpin' *frijoles!* If this don't bring th' Rangers, nothin' will! Kelly, yuh ol' sway-back, yuh gotta ride, an' ride like hell!"

LOCKING the door of his office, Sheriff Beeman glanced up and down the dark street and strode rapidly across the town's main thoroughfare to the Silver Dollar Saloon. As he pushed through the batwing doors, a dozen pinch-faced gunmen flicked swift, inquiring glances at him. He nodded and stepped through the door at the rear of the bar marked "Office."

Colt Craver looked up quickly, then finished pouring himself a drink from a bottle on the table. The king-pin's viper eyes glinted brightly with anticipation.

"Well?"

"The Kid gent," Beeman informed sarcastically, "yuh've been ravin' so about ain't no place tuh be found. It's after twelve a'ready."

Frowning, Craver studied the wet circles made by his glass on the table top. Then he rose, looked steadily at the sheriff.

"Kid or no Kid," he rumbled, "we're gonna git thet ranch t'night. Me—I'm takin' th' girl an' headin' for Mexico till th' smoke clears. Then I'll come back. An' in th' meantime, Mister Beeman, yuh're gonna make it look like Kid Cabras shot 'em up out at th' ranch. An' yuh're gonna *git* this gun-slickin' rim-rock rider, th' Kid, if yuh have tuh trail him tuh hell! Git it? *Bueno,* let's dust!"

Eyes flashing with determination, Colt Craver strode belligerently out the door of his office. Pale, eyes shifty, Beeman thumped along behind him. Nodding at four double-gunned jaspers at the bar, Craver banged out the front door. Behind him, hitching up their gun belts, trailed the four men.

At the hitch-rack all six men mounted broncs and rode rapidly out of San Saba—straight east—toward the B-Bar-B. Six tawny-faced silent men they were, whose vulture eyes clung to the dark, sage-rimmed trail ahead.

Hoofs drummed monotonously in the packed sand. Leather creaked. Horses grew sweat-streaked as the miles rolled past. A hard lot of men, packing guns in oiled holsters, swung low on denimed legs. Craver's crew. Killers all.

Five miles out of San Saba, Craver raised his hand for a halt. Together the riders slithered their mounts to a prancing stop. In the darkness a short distance ahead twinkled the lights of a ranchhouse. A house which had at one time shown all the marks of prosperity. Cottonwoods loomed up eerily all about it like motionless, gloomy sentinels.

Craver, turning, pushed his Stetson back on his head. His eyes gleamed.

"Thet," he crowed, "oughta make me a nice spread, Beeman."

Face white in the grey light, Beeman rubbed his kak horn with nervous fingers. "Yeah," he admitted, "providin'—"

Craver snorted angrily. "Listen, Beeman. I ain't worryin' about th' law. Yuh're it as far as I'm concerned. *Sabe?* Kid Cabras gits th'

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credit for this t'night." Craver's voice grew soft, silky. His eyes became slits. "Yuh got th' bank money, didn't yuh, Sheriff? What yuh yelpin' about?"

Beemans' eyes darted quickly to the granite-faced Craver men about him. Craver, yellow teeth showing, grinned unpleasantly. Beeman swallowed hard.

"I ain't yelpin', Craver," he said.

Craver's grin broadened. But there wasn't any mirth in it. His eyes glowed with sudden resolve as he murmured, "Oh!" Beeman's eyes widened, sudden fear flashing over his face.

Craver, still looking at the sheriff, addressed the tight-lipped gun crew about him.

"Gents," he said, "yelpin' ain't healthy—even in coyotes. Things is gittin' hot for us around San Saba an' one little yelp might stretch all our necks. Me, I'm gonna be cock o' th' walk or nothin'! Beeman here, he *was* tuh git th' bank money. But he's squeakin'. Yuh with me, boys?"

In the strained silence, one *hombre*, eyes on Beeman, spoke quietly: "You, Craver, yuh're th' *jefe!*"

The other four gunmen nodded. Craver's fingers tapped gently on his saddle-horn. He smiled exultantly. Face white, Beeman still stared at Craver. Then, shrilling a curse, his hand dived frantically gunward. Five other hands moved too. Moved like lightning against the speed of the gunstamped sheriff. Red flame lashed out from the muzzle of Craver's gun just as the sheriff's iron cleared leather.

Gun still unfired, Beeman rose in his stirrups, stiffened, and toppled limply from the kak, his gun falling to the ground. Smoke wreathed darkly about Craver's evil face as he sheathed his gun. His eyes moved from the still figure of the sheriff on the ground to the hard-eyed men about him. They, too, holstered their unfired guns.

"I like gents," Craver purred coldly, "thet I know will keep their tongues behind their teeth. Th' bank money," Craver nodded to each man,

"will be split four ways. Now let's ride!"

LEAVING the livery stable, Jim Lake rode straight east for the B-Bar-B ranch. His mount pounded furiously along the brush-rimmed trail, vague in the dim light. His mind raced with a dozen thoughts until finally he topped a rise to glimpse a twinkle of yellow light in the distance—the light of a ranch-house. He spurred his bronc forward.

Through rocky arroyos, up and down slopes, Lake raced his mount. Good grazing here. Plenty of water. B-Bar-B land. No wonder Craver wanted it. No fences. Just a table-like sweep of grazing land, ideal for a *remuda*.

As he came nearer the house he reined in his mount to a walk. Across the grass-tufted lawn he rode. Not a sign of life inside the house or out. Then a shadow flitted across one of the windows.

Not even a dog barked as he passed the out-buildings. Strange. Not a sign of life anywhere. That the place had seen prosperous days was obvious. But now things showed signs of neglect. The corral fence sagged in a state of delapidation. The buildings were sadly in need of whitewash.

Lake halted his bronc beneath a canopied shed. Sliding from the saddle he strode boldly toward the main house. As he passed through the shadow of the bunkhouse a board creaked inside the low-roofed building.

"Grab air, mister," a voice ordered. "I'm nervous—an' this trigger works on a hair!"

Lake whirled in his tracks, hands raising obediently skyward. In one of the open windows of the bunkhouse a rifle jutted menacingly.

"Morgan's dead, mister," Lake said coolly. "Craver got him t'night. I rode out here tuh get Craver."

The man behind the gun growled. "We know he's dead, gunnie," he replied harshly. "We know of th'

(Continued on page 118)

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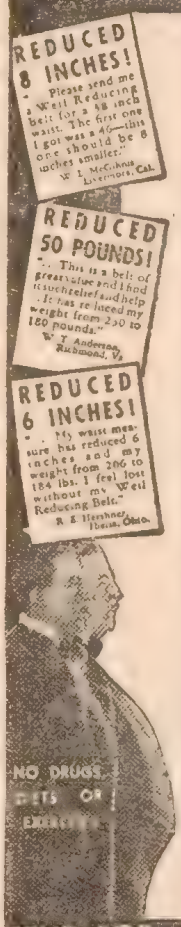
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(Continued from page 117)

frame-up—you an' Craver an' yore murderin' outfit—"

"I come out here," Lake repeated coldly, "tuh get Craver. He's comin' out t'night with guns smokin'!" There was a convincing note in his voice.

The man in the shadows hesitated. Then: "We'll *habla* in th' house," he grunted. "Keep yore paws in th' wind. I'm comin' out th' window."

Out of the aperture crawled the man, rifle jutting ahead of him. He was a typical cowhand, bent, eyes glinting wrathfully in the shadow of his flopping hat brim.

"Move," he snarled, "t'ord th' house." He motioned with his head toward the ranchhouse.

Lake strode across the yard, the old man behind him. As they thumped up on the veranda the door of the house creaked inward, just ahead of them. Outlined in the doorway stood another man. In his hand was a gun—covering Lake from the front. In the long hallway behind the man burned an oil ceiling lamp, giving the entire hallway a dull, yellow glow.

"Who's this gent, Slane?" In a deep rumble the man in the doorway spoke.

Lake halted. The gent behind him stepped to one side.

"He says he rid out here tuh git Craver," the old rider sneered. "He's honin' tuh talk plumb bad."

Eyes regarding Lake searchingly, the man in the doorway motioned Lake inside the hallway. The man Slane quickly removed Lake's guns from their holsters. Softly an inner door opened. In the doorway, large brown eyes red-rimmed from weeping, stood a girl. She was dressed in riding trousers and boots. Up and down her eyes flashed over Lake, coldly suspicious.

Slane nodded toward Lake uncertainly. "He says he rid out from San Saba tuh git Craver, Miss Ann," he explained. "He says—"

Lake's face flushed under the icy stare of the girl. "I'm not meanin' tuh intrude, Miss," he said quickly.

"I've come out here tuh get Craver. He's comin' out t'night. Comin' out tuh kill yore men! To take you—th' ranch!"

"So *you're* a—a killer, too!" The girl's eyes blazed with hate, voice bitter with scorn.

Face lighting with recognition as he stared at Lake, one of the riders nodded quickly, uttering a grunt of surprise. "I've got yuh spotted, fella!" he grated. "I've been tryin' tuh think where'd I'd seen yuh. It was in Tularosa—years ago. Yuh—yuh're th'—Kid from Cabras!"

"Kid Cabras or th' devil!" Lake snapped. "My guns are as good as yores against Craver!"

"He's talkin'," the old rider admitted, lowering his gun. "If Craver *is* comin' t'night we'll need him bad!"

Face white in the dim light, eyes bright, the girl nodded. "Mister Cabras is right," she indicated Lake, voice full of loathing. "We *do* need his guns to kill the man who—who murdered Dad."

Still skeptical, Slane handed Lake his guns, butts first. As they stood, there sounded dully in the distance the crack of a shot. Tense, the girl, Lake and the two riders stood motionless, listening.

"Craver!" said Slane. "Craver's comin'!"

Guns in his hands, Lake turned, facing the door. Eyes burning with hate, the girl murmured the word "Craver," stepped through the doorway which she had entered. When she returned she held a .45-70 rifle. Slane reached quickly for the oil lamp, lowered it, and blew it out.

In the dark hallway they stood, waiting, guns in their hands — Ann Morgan, Lake and the two old riders. Waited, grimly silent. Each one's figure was a dim outline to the others. In the far corner of the hallway stood Ann Morgan, dark eyes shining brightly, face white.

"Go," Lake warned her softly. "Go in th' other room!" There was anxiety in his voice.

Tauntingly, she laughed, not turning her head. Drumming horses

(Continued on page 120)

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(Continued from page 119)

hoofs became louder. Then slowed down to a prancing halt in the yard. Men's voices, hoarse, jocular, profane in turn. Came the slog of boots, clumping noisily in the arcade.

Outside the hallway door the newcomers halted, whispered. Then boldly came a knock on the door. In the hallway no one spoke. In the charged, ominous silence Slane breathed hissingly, barely audible to the others about him.

"It's Colt Craver! I wanna talk. Hear me?" His voice was rumbling, demanding. "Are yuh there, Ann?"

From the door Lake's narrow eyes flicked to the girl. She looked ghostly. When she spoke her voice was toneless.

"Come in, Craver!"

Craver chuckled. He whispered something inaudible to his men. Slowly the knob of the door turned—from the outside. Then suddenly the door burst open!

Hulking figure crouched, Colt Craver filled the doorway. In his hand was a gun. Behind him, grey, silent, stood his four gunmen. The smirking, crooked grin on Craver's thick lips slowly faded. He blinked, stared into the gloom of the hallway.

Then he saw Lake.

"You!" he shrilled. "Kid Cabras—yuh—yuh—"

Through clenched teeth, Lake laughed. But his lips didn't move. Hideous, blood-curdling, that laugh reverberated through the hallway. Like a wounded bull, Craver roared a warning, fear-filled, fierce. The gun in his hand jerked up, waist-high. As if released from springs the hands of his four gunmen slithered desperately holsterward.

Too fast for the eye to follow, Lake's hands streaked downward. His body jerked, a sidewise motion, like the strike of a viper. His arms didn't move. Only his hands from the wrists down. No human eye could follow that speed. And from his hips came the licking orange streaks of his crashing six-guns. So close behind Craver's gun roar it

sounded as one ear splitting explosion.

From the doorway came a veritable wall of flame. The two B-Bar-B riders' guns joined in the salvo of fire. Even above the din the girl's rifle roared its thunderous message of death. Gun still spewing, Craver's body stiffened. He rose on his toes, clutched his chest, eyes popping from their sockets. He tottered, dead on his feet, then lumbered forward one step and fell like a giant oak.

Hot lead burned Lake's side. His left arm hung limp. One stride nearer the door of flaming guns he staggered, eyes red, choking in the smoke-filled room, his one gun still killing with deadly precision. His body shuddered, jarred, fell back, moved forward. He stumbled over the body of Craver, dropped to his knees.

Two of the men in the doorway were down. Another snarling blasphemy, clutched his throat, fell. The girl screamed as she saw Lake drop to one knee. Sprawled on the floor lay one of the old riders, body torn with slugs from the first blast. Now Slane surged forward, toward the door, face blood-streaked, blatting inaudible curses through frothing lips. He fired as he fell.

Silence.

The inexplicable silence that follows a thunder clap.

Staggering unsteadily to his feet, Lake stared dully about him through the smoke-filled room. Uttering a little cry, the girl ran to his side, put her arm about him for support.

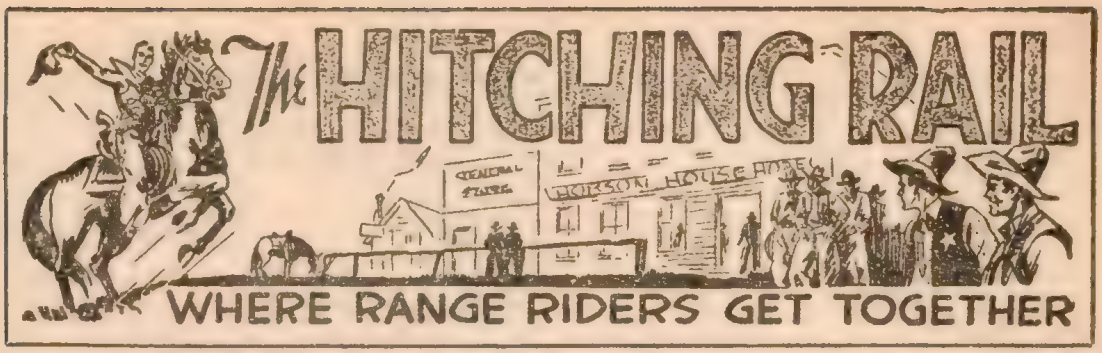
Running feet sounded in the arcade. Guns in hands, three men climbed over the bodies in the doorway, flashed swift glances at Lake and entered the hallway, sheathing their guns.

They all wore stars on their vests, shiny in the dim light.

"Lake!" one of the men thundered. "What th'—"

From the floor by the door came a gurgling, bubbling laugh. It was one of Craver's gunmen. Blood trickled

(Continued on page 126)



YES, SUH, folks, yere we air ag'in, an' seems like a heap o' Juares licker's done flowed under th' International Bridge 'tween El Paso an' that moth-eaten, 'dobe town since us fellas an' gals was sittin' this yere old hitchin' rail an' swappin' yarns.

Thirty days is a long time when us folks hones tuh git spillin' stories ag'in. But yere we air, an' my blood's startin' tuh git nice an' warm ag'in, special after th' long, cold winter what's gone by. But with this yere May sunshine growin' warmer'n warmer ev'ry day, we ain't got no cause fer complaint.

We've bucked th' blizzards an' come through top o' th' pile, an' that's good. Boss has done shed his red woolens, I've shoved mine back in my old cow-hide trunk with a lotta moth balls, an' Miss Blondie's growin' prettier'n prettier ev'ry durned day.

She Shore Is Pretty

Heap o' times I jest squats yere in my swivel chair, chawin' my pencil an' wonderin' how th' Lord could ever uh made a human so good on a fella's orbs. Last evenin' th' boss tuk her an' me tuh see that movin' picture called "Naughty Marietta," an' ef yuh've saw it, yuh shore musta felt yore hearts beatin' plumb hard at watchin' Jeanette McDonald's loveliness 'longside o' Nelson Eddy. An' their voices, folks! Yuh couldn't beat 'em with a coupla thousan' grand operies what's costin' folks a heap o' *dinero* tuh buy ther seats in th' Metropolitan Opery House.

While th' boss an' Miss Blondie an' me was sittin' there in a sorta trance, I slipped my paw over her'n an' whispers soft-like, "Yo're a heap prettier'n her, gal, an' ef I war forty some odd years younger—" In th' dark, I squeezed her fingers.

But her answer come ag'in my ears like one o' them thunder-claps what shakes my old Dragoon Mountains down in Arizony till fella thinks he's gonna be buried alive. She pokes a paper bag at me and whispers back, "Eat some peanuts, Pop. You talk better with a mouthful of 'em!" Durn! How kin a cowpoke keep up his romantic feelin's while chawin' them nuts?"

A Snake Story

But this mawnin' when I gits tuh this offise, I found a letter from Jess Taylor, what runs th' Long Horn Cattle Ranch down 'long th' Rio Grande, an' th' yarn he spins gives me back a heap o' chuckles an' new gumption, only Jess shore's proved hisself a swell old liar—got me beat a mile.

I'm gonna let yuh hear it. Jess says an old prospector what lives 'crost th' Rio come lopin' up before th' ranchhouse few days ago on uh old paint hoss an' told 'im this yere yarn. Seems like th' old gold-digger owned a black tom cat what was a pet in his shack in th' hills. While th' old man was in town, gittin' hisself soaked with whiskey ag'in snake bites, a big rattler crawls intuh his shack an' bites that cat hard and quick; so durned quick that th' cat couldn't even fall down, jest stood there, dead, swelled up 'most as big's a bronc and stiff-legged.

When th' old fella got back home, there stood th' cat, jest thataway.

Old Hank War Quick

Old Hank—that's th' prospectors' neck-bell—got madder'n all git-out, he lovin' that cat a heap. He hunts 'round an' sees Mister Rattler under th' bunk—six footer an' ready fer another fight. Old Hank drank up what war left in his last bottle o' red-eye, rolls up his sleeves, gits down on his knees an' eyes that durned rattler savage. Th' rattler struck out at 'im pronto, but old Hank war quicker.

Like streaked lightnin' over th' Mule Mountains come night time, he struck back, drove his breath intuh th' snake's face and then bit th' snake behind th' haid. Th' snake fainted, right then an' there, an' when it come to, tuh fight some more, it war plumb daid, and stiff as a board.

Old Hank told Jess that he used a six-pound hammer an' druv that snake's tail intuh th' ground in front o' his shack an' now's usin' it as a hitch-rail fer his bronc. Jess says in his letter that he's findin' that yarn hard tuh believe, an' so'm I.

Ramblin' Through th' Mail

Well, ever'body, let's git us ramblin' through some o' these fine letters what's askin' fer replies. Tommy Burns o' Brooklyn, where's all them churches an' where folks is said tuh sleep ten hours a day, asks when th' Texas Rangers was organized.

I onct walked from th' Brooklyn Bridge

plumb up tuh Prospect Park, Tommy, an' seen a milyun folks skatin' there an' doin' a heap o' leg-whirlin' in fancy stunts, so I knows yore town right good.

Tommy, th' Texas Rangers was first organized way back October 17, 1835, by whut was called th' "Permanent Council," all Texans. From then on, they've shore built up one big reputation as peace officers an' men o' grit an' Brains — none better.

Hundred Percent He-Men

I've knowed a heap of 'em, an' ev'ry one a hundred percent he-man an' hard tuh lick. A few months ago th' Texas Legislature passed uh Act makin' 'em now a part o' th' Highway Patrol o' th' State, an' us cow country fellas feels like our Rangers has been stabbed in th' back, after a hunderd years o' upholdin' law an' order all along th' border and makin' a rep ain't no other body o' men kin ever beat—nohow.

Tony Tobin's Ride

Next comes Harry Atkins o' Baker, Californy, out where th' roses blooms an' them nudist colonies is gittin' plumb stylish. Hope yuh don't do no peepin', Harry. Fella onct went cross-eyed doin' that, an' ev'ry time he tried tuh fork a hoss afterwards, he hadda have two hosses standin' side by side, facin' in different ways, so's he could be sure uh mountin' one of em. But yore pitcher shows yuh with a heap o' clothes on yit, Harry, an' plumb swell cow clothes, too. Them white Angora chaps comes high—forty dollars an' up, with th' sky th' limit.

Harry wants tuh know somethin' 'bout a famous ride took by fella named Tony Tobin. Yuh musta been diggin' intuh Santa Fe Trail hist'ry, Harry. This ride war a long way back, but a record what still stands. Besides Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, Lucien Maxwell, Bill Williams an' others what made real hist'ry on that old trail, Tony Tobin was a real rider.

Tobin made his long, swift ride back in 1846, but few fellas has ever beat it—830 miles without stopping 'cept to change hosses. But come along fella named Felix Aubrey short while later, who claimed Tony's time warn't half good enough. So Felix starts out tuh beat Tony's record, an' he made th' 830 miles in *seven days and eight hours,* a third less time than Tony's!

Not a Lost Art

When folks gits talkin' o' ridin', Harry, jest let 'em lamp them two rides an' draw in a deep breath afore they tackles one like it. 'Course, both men had plenty fresh broncs spotted along th' way. But fella don't do much loafin' when he's coverin' over a hunderd miles a day hoss-back, an' he's shore gotta be rawhide tough. But lemme tell yuh, Harry, they's plenty cowboys ridin' range today what kin do it, an'

(Continued on page 124)

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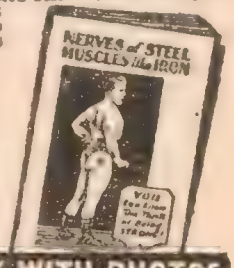

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(Continued from page 123)

I know a heap of 'em. It ain't no "lost art," Harry, not by a long shot.

A Sunny Place

And now we comes tuh Mary Maxwell, from Yuma, Arizona. Folks, I been there, an' one hotel has a sign out front what reads "Free room and board for every day the sun don't shine," an' ain't many folks what's ever won th' bet. But does it git hot, come summer time?

Anybody wantin' tuh know, jest write Mary herself. But heat shore ain't hurt yore pretty looks, Mary, sittin' yore bronc thataway an' smilin' like you an' me was sittin' a corral fence an' chawin' Salt River apples.

Next time I comes down yore way, we'll do that, an' smile at th' whole world, hot or cold.

Mary's lookin' up hist'ry, folks, an' asks 'bout th' old Overland stages.

Th' Overland Stage

Them stages started in 1848, Mary, through yore country. The stages was got up elegant, each carryin' eight passengers, th' driver an' eight armed guards. Drawed by, usually, six strong, fast mules. 'Course, sometimes, by six hosses, hand-picked.

Th' outside o' th' stage war fancy painted an' made waterproof and watertight, so's they could be used as boats when crossin' streams. Th' fare from St. Joe, Missouri, tuh Santa Fe war $250.00, with 40 pounds o' baggage allowed each passenger. Th' $250 included grub — hardtack, bacon an' coffee, an', when shootin' war easy, yuh got some antelope an' buffalo meat on yore way.

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS
ON PAGE 108

1. R. M. Coleman of Bastrop, famous Indian fighter. He received his commission in 1836 from President David G. Burnet of the Republic of Texas, at that time a separate nation.

2. The Kiowas. Their pact of friendship was made in 1795 and was never broken.

3. Captain Bill McDonald, whose astonishing record of courage and daring was made in the 1890's and early 1900's.

4. No. This daring outlaw was born in New York City in 1859. His parents emigrated to Kansas with Billy and a brother three years later.

5. These were dangerous bucking horses, never ridden, whose ears were cut short as a distinguishing mark.

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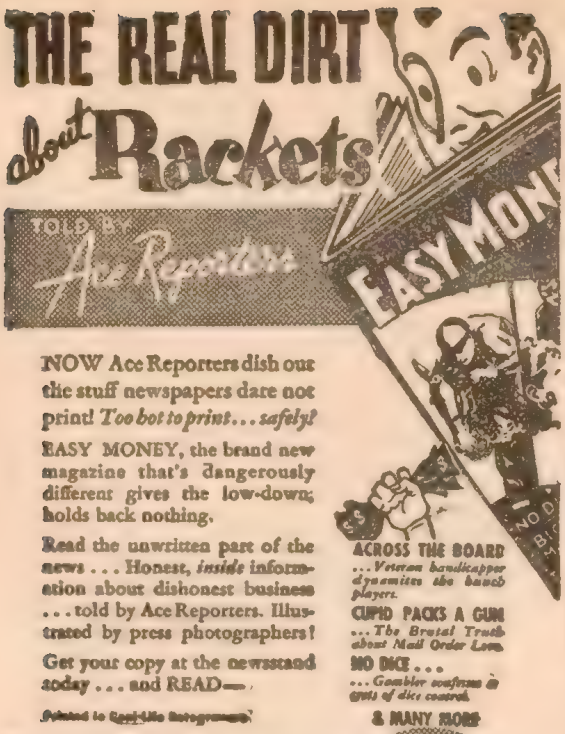

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RIDER OF THE RIMROCK

(Continued from page 121)

from the corners of his mouth.

"I'll tell yuh what," he called gaspingly. "I'll tell yuh. Craver wanted tuh be th' whole hog or nothin'. He robbed th' bank. He—he sent a note tuh Kid Cabras"—weakly the gunman nodded to Lake—"tuh come tuh San Saba. He sent Beeman out tuh bushwhack yuh, Kid, but Beeman missed, I reckon."

The gunslick's voice grew fainter. He laughed again, rattlingly.

"He always feared yuh, Kid—Craver did. Scared as hell o' yore guns. But when yuh didn't show up tuh ride with us tuh th' ranch t'night, he figgered he'd run th' show without yuh. He killed Beeman. But Craver's dead, Kid. When our—little—fracas started just now—I shot him once in th' back myself—jest—f o r—g o o d—luck—" Gasping, the pinched-faced gunman finished. His eyes slowly closed and he lay still.

Eyes quizzical, one of the men stepped forward, held Lake erect. Large brown eyes soft now, Ann Morgan glanced concernedly up at Lake's grim-lined face.

"Where'd this jasper get th' idea callin' yuh Kid Cabras, Lake?" the man at Lake's side asked quickly.

Tiredly, Lake smiled. "Kid Cabras was my brother, Bartle," he said quietly. "He was th' cause o' my quittin' th' Rangers. I came down here tuh find him—tuh try an' straighten him out. He—he was just a hell-bent kid. But comin' intuh San Saba I found him—dry-gulched on th' trail. Then I sent yuh a note by th' stableman Kelly, that I'd be needin' yore help an' where'd yuh find me. This," he said dryly, "is th' finish—what yuh just heard from th' Craver gent. They thought I was Kid Cabras—Danny. My brother and I looked so much alike."

The grizzled old Ranger wagged his head. He smiled at the careworn, pale-faced Ann Morgan. One of the other Rangers in the doorway cleared his throat and grinned.

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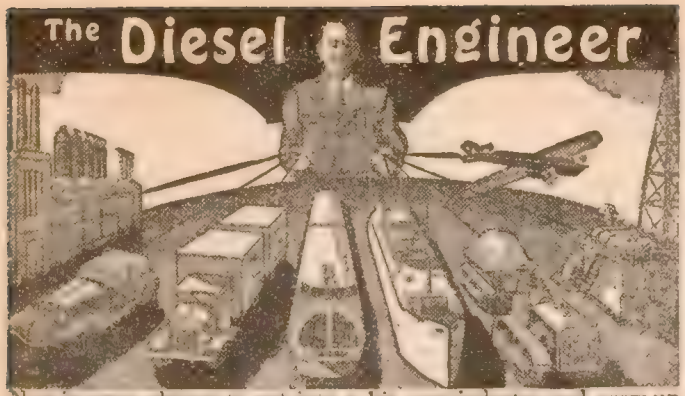

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"Shot up like he is," the old Ranger addressed the girl, "it shore looks like Jim Lake's gonna be stove-up here at yore ranch a long spell healin' up."

Arms still about Lake, the girl looked up at him. Their eyes met and clung. When she looked again at the Ranger she smiled blushingly.

"I hope he is here a long, long time," she murmured.

"And that," Lake grinned weakly, "goes for me, too!"

THE FIRE EATERS

(Continued from page 108)

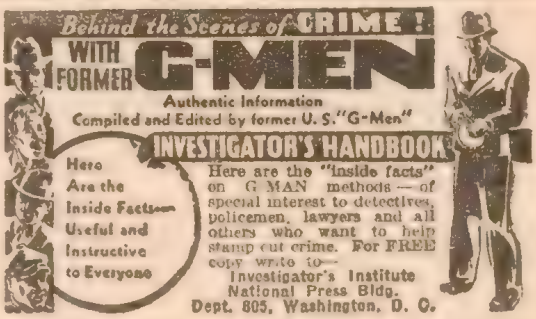
is a-quittin'. Hey, yuh wouldn't leave a pal all alone up here."

But they ain't no answer to that. That yeller-backed coward has done quit his old pal. An' right then I decides that while a Hooker ain't afraid of nothin', after all what's the use of temptin' nature by dodgin' lightnin'? What I crave is lots of distance and less elevation.

But thinkin' about that ladder, I figgers that's out, and turnin' things over fast in my haid like I allus do in sech emergencies, I yanks off my leather jacket, an' leanin' out the winder, I wraps it 'round one o' them guy cables tuh keep my hands from gittin' burnt.

Then I grabs a tight holt an' hangs both spurs over that dang cable, after which I shoots down out o' there with a ranger map o' Ari-

(Continued on page 128)



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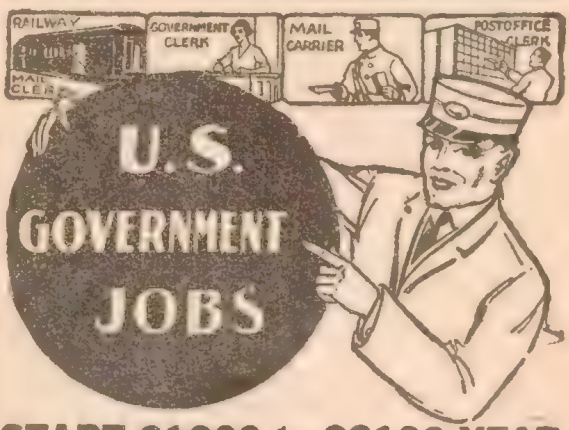

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(Continued from page 127)

zona hangin' tuh a spur, an' the danged telescope still stickin' in the top o' my boot.

About halfway down I swipes the top of a tall tree, leavin' the map o' Arizony there an' part o' my pants where I ain't got no chaps. But that ain't nothin'; all I'm jist hopin' fer is not t' meet a couple o' them balls o' lightnin' comin' up. Seems like that danged cable is a mile long, an' the fu'ther I go the more she sags.

Fin'ly I shoot down 'tween a row o' big pines an' trim the tops off a bunch o' young aspens, after which I whams intuh a bunch o' young spruce, which bein' plumb limber slow me down considerable.

I ain't got no way o' knowin' what that blamed cable is tied tuh, but I'm bettin' it ain't nothin' soft. Thinkin' right quick, I turns all holts loose an' grabs the top o' a li'l pine, which bends over nearly t' the ground 'fore she busts off. When I land, it's in a pile o' pine needles.

I STUMBLES around in the smoke 'til I run intuh that tower, when right outa the sky drops a lead elephant, near drivin' me out o' sight.

"What the heck?" bellers One-Ton from above me. "How'd yuh git down here so quick, Johnny?"

"Nemmine that," I bawls. "Whyn't yuh look where yuh're divin' off to? Let's take off from here."

The smoke's circled back so dang thick we're coughin' an' sputterin' worse'n that ol' Lizzie o' ours when my li'l brother Stevie tries tuh run it on coal oil.

We ain't got no hats, parts of our pants is missin', but both of us is filled with the well knowed Hooker determinashion t' git places in the world. I figger we fought enough fire for one day; it looks like the danged fire has burnt up all the grass so they ain't no use of us stayin' up here no longer nohow.

An' anyway, how kin yuh fight a forust fire which hops around like a damn fool steer on the end of a rope? Let them dang forust rangers

Brighter **COLLEGE HUMOR** *15c Everywhere*

tend to it; that's what they're paid for!

We gits down outa there somehow, suckin' in so much smoke we'll never feel natcheral 'less we stand on the smoky side of a campfire. Ev'ry time we breathe, we puffs out smoke worse'n a sawmill engine.

Down below we runs into some horses, and among 'em is mine an' One-Ton's. The forust ranger is off somewhere, an' we don't hunt 'round for him; we jest piles in our saddles and hightails it down the slope, keepin' goin' until we're down in the home range.

There we find my li'l brother Stevie and Pablo an' old George drivin' a bunch o' our cows toward the mountain.

"Turn them golrammed cows back!" I bellers.

"What's the idea?" demands Stevie. "Whyn't yuh come down here before and tell us where to take these cattle? An' what's all that haze up on top the mountain? Where yuh been anyway?"

"Where we been?" I says indignant. "We been over watchin' the Hopis give a rattlesnake dance. Where we been, dammit? Where does it look like we been?"

"It kinda looks like yuh birds been through a forust fire, but don't git so sore about a simple question," says Stevie. "Le's hustle these pore starved cows on up where there's some grass."

"Lemme tell yuh something," I says. "Them cows is goin' t' stay down here on the desert and tighten their belts an' like it. Yuh hear that?"

"Amen," says One-Ton. "Sometimes yuh show a li'l glimmer of sense, Johnny."

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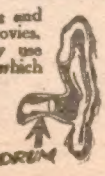

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There are many other names given to this disease, but you can easily tell if you have it.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form and the skin cracks and peels. After a while the itching becomes intense and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

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Beware of It Spreading

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

It has been said that this disease originated in the trenches, so some people call it Trench Foot. Whatever name you give it, however, the thing to do is to get rid of it as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

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The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows that it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ, so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

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H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. Sent on FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money, don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you we know that you will be glad to send us $1.00 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

Mail this Coupon

GORE PRODUCTS, INC.,
890 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better I will send you $1.00. If I am not entirely satisfied I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME .....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....